The Thermonuclear Revolution and the Politics of Imagination:
Realist Radicalism in Political Theory and IR
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I. Introduction

On the 1st of March 1954, the US conducted the Castle Bravo test of a thermonuclear weapon on Bikini atoll. The explosive power of the device was an astonishing 12-15 megatons, more than twice the expected yield. Combined with inaccurate meteorological forecasts of fallout patterns the test eventually led to the evacuation of military personnel and inhabitants of islands close to the Bikini atoll as well as the radiological poisoning of Japanese fishing men aboard the trawler Lucky Dragon, a highly publicized story that broke in mid-March. More facts about the test were released in late March and early April amid growing concern about the H-bomb. In the ensuing years, it was gradually realized that this new device had global implications not only in terms of international relations but also in relation to health effects and effects on the environment.

In this article, we argue that the seizures of the thermonuclear revolution during the most perilous phase of the Cold War have considerable theoretical and practical relevance for current debates about the nature and scope of political realism in both International Relations (IR) and political theory. The revolution
helped spur a strand of oppositional and countercultural thinking that we term realist radicalism. When studied in its historical context, realist radicalism connects current theoretical aspirations on behalf of political realism with political practice. It highlights the need to think about politics beyond the state and the benefits of expanding our purview of thinkers worthy of serious attention. In confronting the thermonuclear revolution, realist radical voices provided a critique of the power structures and ideological skewers that produced specific conceptions of the real, while offering a constructive plea for nurturing the human imagination and its utopian dimensions. During the 1950s and early 1960s, realist radicals offered critical analyses of the centralization and militarization of power and the erosion of democracy. In this context, they challenged a purported, conventional (state-centric) realism which in turn kicked off a struggle over the nature of political reality. Realist radicals asked their readers to imagine nuclear destruction. Their aim was to escape the narrow confines of state-centric realism and to promote a new outlook that was global in reach and took the interests of future generations into account. As a form of political thinking, the anti-nuclear arguments we examine were not formulated in the idiom of contemporary theory, and they were certainly not flawless. They are, however, worth recovering at a time when global threats from nuclear weapons and climate change coalesce with
old and new challenges to democracy that range from the politics of fear and militarization to post-factual fabrications of political reality.

Furthermore, the historical study of realist radicalism is theoretically relevant for current attempts to harness and scrutinize the progressive dimensions of political realism by rethinking and reformulating realism’s understanding of utopianism and the faculty of imagination.4 This theoretical ambition is primarily associated with the work of Raymond Geuss, who has recently pointed to the imagination as a potential escape hatch from an amoral realism of the status quo. His discussion of the concept of the imagination remains underdeveloped, however, particularly in light of the rich debates about realism and the imagination during the thermonuclear revolution. These debates add historical texture to the role of imagination in politics. Yet they also posit a direct challenge to the statist focus of much contemporary realist theory and underline the need for a realism that is attuned to the globality of contemporary politics.

We begin by discussing the central tenets of realist radicalism. Relying chiefly on the work of Raymond Geuss who develops an understanding of realism as a deeply contextual and non-moralistic, though not necessarily anti-utopian, form of political thinking, we argue that his understanding of realism is theoretically compatible with an understanding of a radicalism concerned with explaining power relations and the emancipation of human beings from such relations. In the
second section, we briefly sketch the reactions of card-carrying realists to the thermonuclear revolution before turning to an examination of the writings of C. Wright Mills (1916-1962) and Lewis Mumford (1895-1990). Even though these two American thinkers are not conventionally read as realists, their responses to the thermonuclear revolution issued in a realist radicalism that sought to destabilize existing conceptions of ‘realism’ and ‘practicality’ in politics. The final section argues that their realist radicalism was formulated with a particular goal in mind: developing the human capacity to imagine, which according to Mills and Mumford was a precondition not only for critique and the emancipation of human beings but also for the present and future survival of humankind in the nuclear age.

II. Realism and radicalism

Political realism occupies a central position in IR, and it is arguably well on its way to a similar standing in political theory judging from the recent flurry of attention it is accorded in this field. Over the past decades IR scholars have discredited the narrow textbook rendering of realism as (merely) an amoral, state-centric explanatory theory. In a more recent, but parallel development, political theorists have sought to mobilize political realism in an effort to critique the dominant moralist, analytical approach – often associated with the neo-Kantian framework
of John Rawls and his students – in their field. Fine-grained examinations of these trends identify significant variation, but a broader pattern is discernible: the recovery of a theoretical approach that returns power to its central place in (the analysis of) politics and simultaneously offers a position from where to criticize overly idealistic and ideological policies without simply affirming the status quo.

The recent contributions of Raymond Geuss to this debate are particularly significant. In his 2014 E.H. Carr Memorial Lecture – published under the title ‘Realism and the Relativity of Judgement’ – Geuss outlines a broad conception of realism that is defined by a negative and a positive dimension. The negative dimension refers to realism’s incompatibility with moralism, which he understands as an ‘absolutist framework’ of ‘contextless principles’ that ‘is easy to discern for all men of good will’ and which provides legitimacy for specific political actions. The positive dimension refers to the realist emphasis on power and interests in the (contextual) analysis of social and political problems – a well-rehearsed theme. Geuss, however, deploys his philosophical acumen to refute a common retort; that a realist concern with the ‘now and around here’ must necessarily end in the relativism of a cynical Realpolitik:

Realism ... is about the importance and centrality to politics of a form of judgement that is context dependent, although not ‘relativistic’ in the traditional philosopher’s sense. Avoiding moralism is perfectly
The claim that any type of realism must take into account reliable contextual knowledge about the world and display a sense of practical possibility is difficult to reconcile with a view of utopia as *telos*, but by no means excludes realists from identifying alternative futures understood as historically specific possibilities for social change and human emancipation. Geuss' insistence on this point is intimately connected to his critique of Carr's contrast of realism with utopianism rather than moralism, a typical juxtaposition in IR that has also wandered into political theory. For example, William Galston, in a widely-read article on the emergence of a realist alternative to ideal theorizing within political theory, defines realism by its 'resolutely anti-utopian stance' and argues that its focus on preventing the worst means that 'principles cannot serve as standards for political life until their implementation is feasible in the world as we know it'.

Evidently, there are forms of utopianism – particularly those associated with blueprints and a presupposed finality that could foster totalitarian practices – that are incompatible with political realism. For Geuss, however, it is decisive to install moralism rather than utopianism as realism's other, and he argues that realism is not inherently incompatible with all kinds of utopianism. Although political realists have to balance 'is' and 'ought' in a variety of ways and within different empirical
contexts – in the process risking a loss of balance and realist character – Geuss points out that there is a strand of utopianism concerned with ‘the social construction of “impossibility” in politics, and our ability to undo that construction’ that is ‘compatible with realism’.16

Geuss’ efforts to avoid stalemates of realism will appear familiar to scholars trained in IR. E.H. Carr (1892-1982) himself, of course, was fully aware of the limits of realism when he concluded that a pure realism would exclude ‘four things which appear to be essential ingredients of all effective political thinking: a finite goal, an emotional appeal, a right of moral judgment and a ground for action’.17 Even on a fairly conventional reading, classical realism asks how humans should act under current or different circumstances. The attraction of prominent twentieth century realists lies, at least in part, in the critique they advanced and the projects for moral reflection and political reform these critiques entailed. Realist theory remains a relevant tradition today not solely because of its strong focus on Realpolitik but as much because many of its central thinkers (including Carr, Herz, Morgenthau, Niebuhr and Schuman) provided compelling arguments in favor of global reform.18 Hence, questions arise not so much about the necessity of distance and critique as to the exact point at which distance becomes detachment and political realism turns into moralism or ‘science fiction’.19
Geuss’ suggestion that realism needs to develop and rethink the role of utopian imagination in political thinking and action is more original. Apart from making the point that all forms of politics involve an element of productive imagination (i.e. reality-making), Geuss harnesses the concept of the imagination as ‘a crucial variable in determining how much I can see, how much I can understand, and whether I can occupy a position from which radical social criticism is possible.’ For a self-identified political realist like Geuss, the turn to the concept of the imagination is controversial. Despite its rich and complex history, the imagination is often associated with fantasies, lies and other flights from reality. Yet for Geuss not all acts of imagination belong to the realm of the fake and fantastic. The imagination also serves to illuminate what is distinctive about the world we inhabit, while identifying and charting possible avenues for future change and social transformation. Geuss’ account remains tentative and only loosely connected to practical politics, but his identification of the imagination as a site where realism and radical aspiration meet carves out a position combining a critique of the moralistic (or the ideal) with the unmasking of the apparent. It allows for the possibility that political realists can find themselves in situations in which the most urgent task is not (or not merely) to warn against illusory or hopelessly ambitious attempts to rationally fix, repair or manage reality, but also – as we will go on to show below in relation to the thermonuclear
revolution – to profoundly question and re-conceptualize social and political dimensions of that reality through the use of their imagination.

Geuss’ political realism is compatible with the radical aspirations of the young Marx in the sense that his radical opposition to prevailing beliefs and practices is preconditioned by analyses of social and political power that overlaps with realism. Realist radical positions are often precarious, but there is no necessary opposition (though often recurrent tension) between the demands of realist analysis and emancipatory aspiration. E.H. Carr was deeply influenced by Marxist thought when he wrote *The Twenty Years’ Crisis* (1939), a classic treasure trove of political realism that exposed the self-interested character of (primarily) liberal ideas. In international politics, principled radical opposition to the existing state of affairs and its underlying structures often translates into a critique of the practices and beliefs of statesmen, diplomats and government officials, which are typically held to be too narrowly concerned with (national or sectional) interests and correspondingly inattentive to other standards (justice, peace, etc.). These arguments reflect that radicalism is a ‘broad church’, where critical analysis (of elites, the government, diplomats, specific policies) often takes prominence over detailed plans for reform. Realists generally display a greater appreciation of statesmanship, diplomacy and the traditional institutions of international politics, but many 20th century incarnations of realism have not been conservative, cynical
or unconcerned with political reform. Against this background, it is hardly surprising that IR scholars have repeatedly explored links between realism and radicalism in programmatic statements, the writings of well-known radicals, or classical realists. Several of these studies have traced some of the roots of realist arguments to left wing milieus or highlighted how their wider import mirrored insights of critical theory.

In our reading, at the most basic level realist radicalism lays claim to political reality, but it is a reality that is often hidden below a veneer of ideology, the seemingly value-neutral language of science and/or self-interested thinking which in turn clouds political judgment. As an approach, realist radicalism involves a way of seeing the political that places power center stage, while devoting considerable energy to exposing and dissecting such realities and the consequences they entail for political action, for example in relation to what is taken for granted or rendered (im)possible. Clearly, individuals may rarely reach complete agreement on the decisive dimensions of power, the nature of social reality and the extent to which it can or should be transformed. Notwithstanding such pronounced differences, however, realist radicals are united in their refusal to accept political reality as always given, readily apparent or accessible.
III. Realism and Realist Radicalism during the Thermonuclear Revolution

Times of political convulsion or crisis have regularly produced innovation in political thought. The French Revolution and the European revolutions of 1848 are obvious cases in point. The thermonuclear revolution constitutes another such moment. In large part due to the work of Campbell Craig, Daniel Deudney and Bill Scheuerman, it is now well-known that those kinds of realism with which political theorists and IR scholars are most familiar, found in the nuclear revolution a challenge that led to re-adjustment and an impetus for broadening their purview. Although the adjustment was sometimes gradual, it typically took a form in which realists analysed the nature and scale of weapons technology – unfathomably destructive H-bombs fitted on globe-spanning missiles – and drew bleak conclusions for the political status of great power war or the territorial dimensions of sovereignty. For these realists, the doctrine of deterrence and its underlying commitment to a narrow instrumental rationality, charged with governing the risk of nuclear war through stylized scenarios, became a potent symbol of the failure to grasp the novel nature of politics after the thermonuclear revolution. It was a failure with both spatial and temporal implications: since a war with nuclear weapons could neither be limited nor won, in terms of security and survival the world was now inescapably one; and since the material effects of the use or testing of these weapons were evident but also uncertain and out of sight, politics had to
be informed by a more profound sense of global and intergenerational responsibility. In short, the H-bomb threatened some basic institutions of international politics. Such diagnoses often ended in a frank admission that supranational forms of governance or government were both desirable and politically necessary (in terms of survival) though unfeasible without an easement of the superpower conflict that governed the Cold War. As Hans Morgenthau argued in 1963, ‘In the long run, I’m in favor of a radical change in the structure of international relations ... World government is appropriate for the technological conditions under which we live’.\textsuperscript{30} John H. Herz, who offered an early and shrewd analysis of the thermonuclear revolution, came to a similar conclusion: the predicament of humankind conferred on everybody a ‘responsibility to think about and work for the creation of conditions in which mankind has a chance to continue existing’,\textsuperscript{31} which for Herz meant charting a universalist course that stressed détente and involved a critique of narrowly conceived national interest in an increasingly global age.

It would be wrong to read such admissions as a retreat from realism. They evince a contextual judgment about appropriate political strategies in the nuclear age (that was also instrumental in producing the inescapably global dimension of politics in our time). However, such recalibrations of realism that heeded progressive imperatives were not just a concern of card-carrying realists such as
John H. Herz, Hans J. Morgenthau and Reinhold Niebuhr. In the US, the public intellectual Lewis Mumford and the maverick sociologist C. Wright Mills developed wide-ranging analyses of technology, society and politics during the thermonuclear revolution that were radical in implication but which had strong affinities with the points made by card-carrying realists. Of the two, Mumford was the one with the most outspoken realist pedigree. In the run-up to and early stages of World War II he launched an attack, partly inspired by Niebuhr’s theological realism, on a dominant strand of American liberalism that issued in isolationism. This creed was bankrupt, due to its optimism about human ability and rationality. It had no grasp of evil, no grasp of ‘instinct, tradition, history’ and no grasp of ‘aesthetics, religion, and ethics’. As Mumford intoned, ‘[t]hose who think that evil can be permanently abolished always feel grossly betrayed when they find it has come back again’. Liberalism had grown mechanical and relativist: it stood for little and faced even less. It was a betrayal; only nominally liberal and without depth and conviction.

Informed by a tragic vision of politics, Mumford argued for the necessity of pursuing broadly liberal ideals in international politics, but with the arrival of atomic and later thermonuclear weapons this belief was fused with a growing pessimism that also informed his work on the history of technology. As he argued within months of the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, liberal ideals had been corrupted and ‘madmen are planning the end of the world. What they call
continued progress in atomic warfare means universal extermination, and what
they call national security is organized suicide’. As the nuclear revolution
deepened he republished and developed his critique. It constituted, essentially, a
desperate blow in a fight, as Mumford saw it, between madness and sanity. Often
stressing the fallible, self-deceiving and pugnacious nature of human beings, he
came to see in deterrence ‘a mad policy, empty of human values and unworthy of
human respect: the policy of underdimensioned men with “ten year old minds,”
operating within a one-generation frame of reference, with no respect for the
values of human history and no concern for the future of the human race’. This
stinging, cynical critique was a central aspect of Mumford’s realist radicalism.

The fact that the US continued to rely on nuclear weapons and the policy of
deterrence – a decision casually communicated to a largely acquiescent public –
was according to Mumford the result of a particular constellation of the forces of
modernity that reached its nadir in the nuclear age. A large part of the explanation
was found in the expansion of *Technics*, a term Mumford borrowed from German in
order to capture the material as well as ideational and cultural dimensions of
technology. In short, ‘the implacable spread of the machine’ had a host of
cultural, social and political effects. Among these, the estrangement created by
technology when it was applied without consideration for human needs and
qualities came to preoccupy Mumford. Though shorn of Marxist terminology, it
amounted to a form of alienation. When informed by a particular strand of modern, instrumental rationality, technology (it turned out) entailed grave risks, including the production of conformist and lethargic citizens, the undermining of democracy and a fundamental transformation of the knowledge economy, systems of education and the formation of individual character.39

The analysis of C. Wright Mills was compatible with Mumford’s. He also lamented the increasing reliance of education and research on the ever-more powerful economic and military machines. It produced agents capable of fulfilling ‘technical functions’ yet with no grasp of ‘ends and meanings’.40 ‘The Cheerful Robot’, a stark image of technological estrangement, became Mills’ favorite metaphor for the kind of individuals produced by 1950s modernity. The ubiquity of this figure at all levels of society, inside and outside the corridors of power, was intimately connected to the expansion of technology:

[M]ust we not face the possibility that the human mind as a social fact might be deteriorating in quality and cultural level, and yet not many would notice it because of the overwhelming accumulation of technological gadgets? Is not that the meaning of rationality without reason? Of human alienation? Of the absence of any role for reason in human affairs? The accumulation of gadgets hides these meanings: those who use them do not understand them; those who invent and maintain them do not understand much else.41
In essence, such examinations of the underlying dynamics of modern life prepared the way for an uncompromising critique of the national security states of the US and (to a lesser extent) USSR and few did more to expose the sociological foundations of such apparatuses than Mills. Like Mumford he emphasized their brutality; their display of an ‘inhuman lack of sensibility characteristic of underdeveloped men in overdeveloped societies’…’42 But Mills also conducted a more fully-fledged study of its sociological basis in the US: the collusion of a power elite drawn from politics, business and the military. These strands of the power elite met in the core institutions of modern America and had compatible if not converging world views. They made decisions of tremendous importance for the American people that under conditions of modernity (such as the manipulative effects of consumption and communication) took on the characteristics of an alienated and ‘inactionary’ mass.43 This constituted not only a democratically questionable transformation of US society; it was also – particularly in the context of the Cold War – an exceedingly dangerous shift. In short, Mills held that since ‘war now means the universal annihilation of man, so peace now is to the universal interests of man.’44 By this Mills did not mean to imply that international politics occurred in a power vacuum. In fact, he thought war a near-natural occurrence in international politics – produced by the effort of one state to prevent others from becoming stronger – and approvingly cited E.H. Carr’s quip that ‘the principal
cause of war is war itself.’45 If it turned out (as it did according to Mills) that the power elite was essentially, if unwittingly, preparing World War III, ‘an attack on war-making is also an attack on the U.S. power elite’.46

Both Mills and Mumford were concerned with a mass society bereft of any vitality, in which the expansion and militarization of state authority occurred without resistance. It was after all, the very engulfment of human faculties in a deadly cocktail of (weapons) technology, capitalism and militarism at the height of the Cold War that made effective critique difficult. The collusion of new forms of production, new technologies and new forms of communication, ranging from propaganda to marketing, turned individuals into ‘spectators’, robots or ‘nullities’, while society came to resemble a ‘mechanically engineered coma’.47

IV. The Fight over Reality and the Importance of the Imagination

Mills and Mumford's resolutely global vision of politics emerged during the thermonuclear revolution. Its central message was the necessity of radical reform and of envisioning alternatives to the potentially disastrous course of global politics. Central insights of political realism played a prominent role in their thinking: a focus on power relations, a contextual form of judgment and a clear-headed appreciation of superpower conflict and its associated real risks of war. After all, it was the existence of thermonuclear weapons that united them in
thinking that great power war had now to be averted in order for civilization to
survive.

In focusing on Mills and Mumford, moreover, we gain access to a heated
debate about what was real and possible after the thermonuclear revolution.
Asking their readers to imagine nuclear destruction was both a vehicle for
critiquing the US national security state and a tool for contemplating alternative
futures. Since their calls for imagination often took place at the intersection of
public debate and political activism, they are often overlooked in IR accounts that
chart the development of theory and strategy at the time. Yet, for Mumford and
Mills an appeal to the imagination was necessary to challenge ‘realism’, which had
obtained a gradually more prominent standing in the US. For Mills and Mumford, it
was crucial that realism and charting a realistic course in global politics was not
conflated with thinking strategically about nuclear weapons. The thermonuclear
revolution demanded that such purported realism was exposed as false and
neutralized. Mumford and Mills turned to the concept of imagination as a means of
exploring how dominant constructions of the politically possible could be
dismantled.

Indeed, Mills and Mumford were outspoken in their critique of nuclear
deterrence and its underlying logic. They generally favored an (albeit often
unspecified) easement in Cold War international politics, universal (and, if need be,
unilateral) nuclear disarmament, and a ban on the testing of nuclear weapons. The militarization of society and the expansion of the national security state during the early Cold War, they argued, produced a dangerous but also partly fake reality. The agents of the national security state may not have intended this, but the very narrowness of their vision made it almost inevitable. It was necessary, therefore, to dismantle and put at a remove official definitions of reality and realism. As Mills put it in his popular book *The Causes of World War Three* (1958):

> We are at a curious juncture in the history of human insanity; in the name of realism, men are quite mad, and precisely what they call utopian is now the condition of human survival. Utopian action is survival action; realistic, sound, common-sense, practical actions are now the actions of madmen and idiots.⁴⁹

Mills termed this view ‘crackpot realism’, a term he had already used in *The Power Elite* (1956), where it was associated with Dulles, Eisenhower and the ‘fearful self-righteousness of sincere young American politicians from sunny California’. He criticized these figures for constructing ‘a paranoid reality all their own’.⁵⁰ Later, however, he applied the term to a specifically technocratic version of national security policy-making in which experts were narrowly focused on ‘practical next steps – which, in summary, make up the thrust toward war – and in great, round, hortatory principles. But without any program.’⁵¹
In 1954, Mumford had been more sanguine about the prospects of realism. In reflecting on the implications of the H-bomb, his stinging critique of the establishment, its frozen minds and their counter-fascist (but also totalitarian) policies, was also accompanied by a call for ‘able realists’ capable of analysing and understanding the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{52} Instead of able realists, however, the coming years witnessed a simplification and corruption of realism deeply marked by the hallmarks of the national security state: secrecy, suspicion and a focus on means rather than ends. Learning and knowledge had narrowed, while power had been transferred to technicians, strategists and politicians manning the sprawling defense industry and operating the new, secretive agencies of the national security state. Yet, the decisions reached by the US involved the entire planet. Like Mills, Mumford came to see this as a fabricated deathtrap. It was simply astonishing that unnamed strategists saw themselves as ‘hard-headed realists’ and described military achievements and artefacts as monuments of security. This made no sense in the thermonuclear age: ‘How far can human self-deception go?’\textsuperscript{53} A policy based on military superiority in the thermonuclear age was nothing more than ‘an illusion of power’.\textsuperscript{54} Yet it was an illusion that flourished widely and indiscernibly determined the (narrow) boundaries of the politically possible.

The differences between Mills’ and Mumford’s attempts to counter the reality-making of the establishment were few and subtle. For example, Mills was
highly alert to the dangers that a (crackpot) realist usurpation could involve on a deeper level than political sound-bites. While he aggressively dissected the so-called realism and its conjured-up military needs as ‘merely the desperate slogans of the morally crippled’, he also worried about the consequences of more sophisticated renderings of political realism in the nuclear age. In contrast to Mumford, who had spoken the language of realist tragedy with conviction in the 1940s, Mills came to associate this vocabulary with the smokescreens of nuclear politics and its escape from democratic oversight: ‘The replacement of the straightforward idea of “political accountability” by the dead-beat notion of “tragic responsibility” is not good enough’. In fact, it amounted to little more than ‘a lugubrious and fatalistic dodge which, adorned with a little liberal rhetoric, leads directly to the political irresponsibility of the conservative.’ Mumford did not offer a similar critique, but it is noticeable that by the late 1950s when the usurpation of realism was near-complete, Mumford had substituted the language of tragedy with one that stressed the undemocratic tendencies of a society characterized by madness, insanity and irresponsibility.

Such differences notwithstanding, the common objective of Mills and Mumford was clear: to escape from the combination of estrangement, complacency and false realism through the reinvigoration of the imagination. The contemplation of the risks and consequences of nuclear destruction served to destabilize existing
versions of reality and exposed another, altogether more uncomfortable but also factually superior rendition of reality. Before Mills even wrote *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), on which his reputation as a sociologist now mainly rests, he formulated a demand for political imagination in the context of nuclear weapons: ‘We must release the imagination, in order to open up a new exploration of the alternatives now possible for the human community...’.\(^{57}\) This was all the more important because the postulates of the powerful about the demands of necessity and realism merely demonstrated an absence of imagination. According to him, this mechanism was at work almost everywhere in modern society, but it was starkly revealed in the production and political use of nuclear weapons. Embodied in such Promethean practices lay a double threat to the core values of civilization: ‘On the one hand, history-making may well go by default, men may continue to abdicate its willful making, and so merely drift. On the other hand, history may indeed be made – but by narrow elite circles without effective responsibility to those who must try to survive the consequences of their decisions and of their defaults.’\(^{58}\)

It was against this background that Mills sought to re-energize the intelligentsia. Faced with the drift towards World War III, intellectuals could not refrain from taking part in the making of history. It was simply not good enough to issue toothless appeals to politicians, retreat into the pockets of comfort provided.
by specialization or avoid entering the fray by referring to the extent and intensity of alienation. The most powerful tool intellectuals possessed was their imagination. It could potentially break the spell. 'What we [the intellectuals] represent ... is man become aware of mankind.' To re-energize intellectuals comfortable in their role as specialists – ‘as minor divisions in a big department store’ – was no easy feat, however. Mills traded balance for effect. In fact, he became exasperated by demands for ‘A Balanced View’: ‘I am not a sociological bookkeeper. Moreover, “balanced views” are now usually surface views which rest upon the homogenous absence of imagination and the passive avoidance of reflection.’ In such provocative outburst lay a recognition that a central task of realist radicalism was to imagine alternatives that were not confined within the prevailing order and the limited array of 'the possible' that it entailed. Given the absurd official version of reality, the truth could only be revealed through unrestrained criticism. In this light, it is hardly surprising that Mills conceived *The Causes of World War Three* as 'a blast, a sermon, a warning, a demand, a squeal'.

As early as 1954, Mumford came to a similar realization. Averting immediate dangers but continuing along the track towards an avoidable conflict or being imprisoned in the belief that politics was the art of the possible in a pre-defined world offered only a slim chance of avoiding catastrophe. It was necessary to bring
into view other alternatives than the officially sanctioned one. That required ‘sufficient flexibility of mind’ and ‘sufficient imagination’. Indeed,

If politics means anything today, it must become “the art of the impossible”. The people who sacrifice every principle to expediency, every long-range plan to immediate profit, are the people who live in a world of slippery fantasies and self-deceptions. In terms of the “possible” we have only two courses open: suicide by appeasement or suicide by “war”.64

In slight contrast to Mills, who spoke directly to young intellectuals, Mumford often related the cultivation of the imagination to similar ventures in the past and often stressed the need for all citizens to perform such roles. He praised John Stuart Mill and in particular Henry Adams – who was also an important intellectual source of inspiration for John H. Herz’s thinking about politics and (weapons) technology – for reflecting on the darker sides of technology, growth and civilization that their contemporaries tended to celebrate uncritically.65 When identifying central figures or moments in traditions of unmasking the apparent, Mumford associated such examples of analytical sharpness – in particular when informed by humanist values – with realism. In 1968, for example, he described the eccentric, late nineteenth-century British socialist William Morris as ‘a resolute realist’, indeed as ‘more of a realist than Marx himself’.66 For Mumford as for Morris, the underlying purpose was emancipation: facing reality was a precondition for ‘critical self-
examination’ and moral reform, which in turn was conceived in humanist (or humanist socialist) terms.\textsuperscript{67} This required a renewed focus on the ‘whole man’, a project that gave new significance to Marx’s idea of ‘the completely developed individual’.\textsuperscript{68} Despite differences in emphasis and focus, Mills and Mumford were in broad agreement about imagination as a precondition for exposing the strange monstrosity of the familiar. Of the two, Mills came closest to theorizing the role of imagination:

\begin{quote}
[What we must do is to define the reality of the human condition and to make our definitions public; to confront the new facts of history-making in our time, and their meanings for the problem of political responsibility; to release the human imagination by transcending the mere exhortation of grand principle and opportunist reaction in order to explore all the alternatives now open to the human community.\textsuperscript{69}
\end{quote}

For Mills, the imagination was central to the task of New Left intellectuals. He referred to this as ‘the politics of truth’ which encompassed ‘a continuing, uncompromising criticism’ of established political culture in order to enable ‘alternative definitions of reality.’\textsuperscript{70} Mumford held similar views and argued that for American democracy to function again, ‘[w]e need audacious, self-respecting people ready, as the Quakers say, to speak truth to power …’\textsuperscript{71}

At this point, Mills and Mumford’s imagination took on an a more practical, institutional form. During the late 1950s, their quest to unmask and challenge
official accounts of political reality became part of popular politics. Already the
Russell-Einstein manifesto of 1955 that led to the establishment of the Pugwash
conferences was infused with a barely hidden suspicion of authorities and the facts
they released about nuclear weapons, testing and fallout. Such fears grew in
subsequent years amidst intense political debates about the arms race and high-
stakes diplomacy concerning moratoriums and a possible ban on testing. On
November 15, 1957, an advertisement detailing the dangers of nuclear weapons
appeared in the New York Times. The main force behind the ad and the formation
of the National Committee for a SANE nuclear policy (SANE) was Norman Cousins,
but it was supported by a group of forty-eight (mainly center-left) figures,
including Lewis Mumford. An independent thinker, Mumford was a difficult ally
that was not content with signing statements. He also sought to persuade Norman
Cousins, editor of The Saturday Review of Literature and the driving force behind
SANE, of the need for a more confrontational political strategy. In a letter of 8
November 1957, Mumford made clear to Cousins that he doubted that the
campaign would make headway 'unless we are prepared to expose and undermine
our present leadership, from Eisenhower and Truman down. So long as they are
accepted as repositories of wisdom and authority, our words will not be heeded,
and no new policy formulated.'
Mills’ realist radicalism also made a mark among anti-nuclear activists. At almost exactly the same time that SANE was established in the US, the foundations of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) were laid in Britain. An article by the playwright and novelist J.B. Priestley castigating a supposedly sober realist, pro-nuclear position as ‘the wildest idealism’ was instrumental in this respect. When Mills travelled to London and lectured at the London School of Economics in both 1957 and 1959, he not only met central figures of the New Left but also found a receptive audience for his ideas. The London Tribune, a socialist weekly with close ties to CND, positively reviewed The Causes of World War Three and described Mills as ‘the true voice of American radicalism’. A few years later, in 1961, The Causes of World War Three, which sold in large numbers in the years after initial publication, was the only book adopted for a SANE display at the Pacific International Exposition in Vancouver. As part of a wider movement for a test-ban and for nuclear disarmament, organizations such as CND and SANE played an important political role during the late 1950s and early 1960s. In this context, the social critique of Mumford and Mills appealed to younger generations increasingly exasperated by the Cold War demand to choose between two unattractive (though not equally unattractive) options.

This practical dimension of realist radicalism eventually went beyond the global threat presented by nuclear weapons. Mumford deployed a similar notion of
imagination in assisting the transformation of conservationism into environmentalism in the US. In this context, he continuously stressed the importance of safeguarding a delicate ecology and putting human footprints in perspective. Nuclear weapons testing was the catalyst. The damage wrought by these tests ‘is cumulative and irretrievable; it admits no belated confession of error, no repentance and absolution’. In this light it was simply shocking to see a government – ‘with its limited perspectives, its fallible judgment, its obvious proneness to self-deception, delusion and error’ – make decisions of potentially momentous consequence for future generations. In the nuclear age, human beings had irrevocably become active geological agents, capable of changing the face of the earth, which in turn demanded reflection and profound sense of responsibility. Realist radicalism, then, solicited a new reflexivity towards the production and evaluation of political realities. Confronting the human condition in the thermonuclear age required first and foremost a nurturing of the imagination – the faculty that could rob the present real of its inexorableness and bring other worlds into view.

V. Conclusion
In this article, we have argued that the thermonuclear revolution led to a form of oppositional thinking that we have termed realist radicalism. Given the current
interest in political realism within IR and political theory, we maintain scholars would do well to re-visit the functions of and debates over realism during this time, not least because nuclear weapons technology represented problems of power, necessity, security, liberty and estrangement in a particularly stark form. In short, the techno-political complex constructed around these weapons was not only gravely dangerous for human civilization; it also concealed social power relations and produced a political reality in dire need of exposure. For Mills and Mumford, appealing to the imagination was central to this quest. As their writings also show, realist radicalism is not a fixed position or a stable category. It is a balancing act both in terms of diagnosis and policy that risks sliding into cynicism or moralism. At times Mills and Mumford were guilty of both, for example when authorities were merely dismissed or when alternatives like disarmament were too easily presented as viable, political alternatives. Yet, they were clearly astute in connecting problems of global violence with the conduct of everyday life, the militarization of society, the homogenization of elite thinking and the erosion of democracy. In their writings, we find a sustained effort to use some of the tools and parts of the vocabulary of political realism to undo this facile reality-making and to undermine the false realisms that accompanied it. There is a clear parallel here to current attempts to rethink realism in political theory. When ‘the idea of alternatives is routinely denied’, the aim of political thinking is not primarily to
provide answers but to ask new questions. Rather than dispensing with realism, in such times it is also necessary to challenge realism and turn it on itself.

This required taking the role of political imagination seriously. Mills and Mumford demonstrate the compatibility of political realism with projects of reform and human emancipation that took as their starting point the need for human imagination as a precondition for effective critique and new political thinking. The utopianism they called for was not of the blueprint variety that invited (yet another kind of) perfectionism or totalitarianism. Mumford had already criticized such projects and their standing in modern literature in the 1920s. According to Mills, “Utopian” nowadays I think refers to any criticism or proposal that transcends the up-close milieux of a scatter of individuals: the milieux which men and women can understand directly and which they can reasonable hope directly to change. In this exact sense, our theoretical work is indeed utopian – in my own case, at least, deliberately so.

The study of realist radicalism during the thermonuclear revolution has significant implications for the current study and revival of realism in IR and political theory. First, it demonstrates the advantages of studying realism and debates about realism historically and in close connection to political practice. Realist radicalism may not always have been effective as a political strategy, but it never lost its connection to political practice. The ideas of Mills and Mumford
found resonance among the movements that were important for the conclusion of
the Limited Test Ban Treaty (1963), a first step towards arms control and arguably
the world’s first environmental treaty. Taking history seriously in turn demands
that we broaden our purview to include insights emanating from beyond a select
group of thinkers from the realist canon. Second, the ideas of Mumford and Mills
point to the limits of taking the state as a necessary starting point for thinking
realistically about politics. Indeed, if – as Geuss intimates – thinking politically
ultimately requires asking the critical question ‘who [does] what to whom for
whose benefit?’⁸⁶ legitimating stories of the state as the provider of security, order
and justice for its citizens appear increasingly shallow in the face of anthropogenic
climate change or the global consequences that would follow from nuclear war.
Hobbes’ active imagination of the Leviathan, so admired by Geuss,⁸⁷ is now itself in
need of re-imagination. Still, realists in political theory rarely venture beyond the
state, and realists in IR have not spearheaded attempts to think about alternatives
to the existing international order. Faced with climate change or renewed fears
about nuclear war, IR realists of recent decades have had disappointingly little to
contribute beyond providing explanations for the current state of affairs that
emphasize power dynamics, interests and status. They have also done little in the
direction of confronting their own entanglement with the current political order,
for example by asking if and to what extent their explanations are self-fulfilling
prophecies, or in terms of critically dissecting the quality and limits of the real and the possible.

Mills and Mumford are important because they demonstrate that current attempts in political realism to harness the faculty of imagination have a longer history. Our predicament, the constellation of global risks and the political context of managing them, is vastly different from that of the 1950s and early 1960s, but threats to planet Earth and its habitability have not disappeared. Both realists and radicals have routinely faulted dominant political theories for being self-serving, moralist or dangerous. During the thermonuclear revolution, the stakes were high but certainly also novel as a purported realism that came to be associated with nuclear strategy produced its own ‘reality’ and threatened to destruct the planet as well as human civilization. To expose the absurdity of such constructions and to bring new alternatives into view required the rekindling of the human imagination. Current attempts to rethink realism in this direction can take several forms, but they should be no less ambitious.

Notes

1 We have benefited from comments and suggestions on earlier versions at seminars at the Danish Institute for International Studies, the University of
Copenhagen and the “Classical Realism Meets Critical Theory” Workshop at Virginia Tech, 5-6 June 2015. All the usual disclaimers apply.


4 See also William E. Scheuerman, ‘The Realist Revival in Political Philosophy, or: Why New is Not Always Improved’, *International Politics*, 50, no. 6 (2013), 798-814.

5 Mumford has been almost entirely neglected in political theory and IR, but see Rens van Munster and Casper Sylvest, ‘Reclaiming Nuclear Politics? Nuclear Realism, the H-Bomb and Globality’, *Security Dialogue*, 45, no. 6 (2014), 530-47. Mills has been slightly better served. For a recent example, see John D. Brewer, ‘C. Wright Mills on war and peace’, in *C. Wright Mills and the Sociological Imagination*, ed. J. Scott and A. Nilsen (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2013), 183-202.


8 See e.g. William A. Galston, ‘Realism in Political Theory’, *European Journal of Political Theory*, 9, no. 4 (2010), 385-411.


11 Williams, ‘Realism and Moralism in Political Theory’, 8.

12 Geuss, ‘Realism and the Relativity of Judgment’, 18. The work of Bernard Williams is driven by similar aspirations. Rejecting approaches that puts the moral before the political, Williams nonetheless sets out to develop minimal conditions of
legitimacy (a Basic Legitimation Demand) to make sure that legitimacy is founded on more than 'might is right'.


17 Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919-1939*, 113.


19 Galston, ‘Realism in Political Theory’, 403.

20 Geuss, *Politics and the Imagination*, x-xi. This and similar suggestions have led not only to an increasing interest in the radical nature of Geuss’ realism but also to attempts to develop realist forms of imagination through literature. See Janosch Prinz, ‘Raymond Geuss’ Radicalization of Realism in Political theory’, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 42, no. 8 (2016), 777-796; Mathias Thaler, ‘Hope Abjuring


22 For this distinction, see Stefano Guzzini, ‘The Enduring Dilemmas of Realism in International Relations’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 10, no. 4 (2004), 533-68.

23 Karl Marx, ‘Karl Marx to Arnold Ruge, September 1843’, in Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, Trans. R. Livingstone and G. Benton (London: Penguin, 1975), 206-9; Karl Marx, ‘On The Jewish Question’ [1844], in Marx, *Early Writings*, ed. J. O’Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 28-56, esp. 50. This position is also central to critical theories, which are often closely tied to social movements and practical forms of radicalism and which seek to explain different kinds of domination with a view to facilitating human emancipation. See also Geuss, ‘Realism, Wishful Thinking, Utopia’.

24 Jonathan Haslam, *The Vices of Integrity: E.H. Carr, 1892-1982* (London: Verso, 1999). There was, in short, no huge leap from seeing in the executive of the state ‘but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie’ to claiming that ‘[n]o country but Great Britain had been commercially powerful


28 See e.g. William E. Scheuerman, ‘Realism and the Left: the Case of Hans J. Morgenthau’, *Review of International Studies*, 34, no. 1 (2008), 29-51; Cozette, ‘Reclaiming the Critical Dimension of Realism’; Casper Sylvest, ‘Technology and


32 For a more elaborate analysis of several thinkers that combined realist and radical ideas during the thermonuclear revolution, see Rens van Munster and Casper Sylvest, *Nuclear Realism: Global Political Thought during the Thermonuclear Revolution* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).


48 For a more elaborate attempt to study such connections, see van Munster and Casper Sylvest, *Nuclear Realism*, esp. ch. 3.


54 Mumford, ‘Alternatives to the H-Bomb’, 6


56 Mills, The Causes of World War Three, 39, 40. Mills’ critique of the authoritarian tendencies present in the US national security state may have been inspired by Franz Neumann, a theorist with ties to the Frankfurt School, whose explanation of National Socialism stressed the dangers of power elites, ‘[cast] light upon capitalism in democracies’ and underlined that “[i]deas are political cloaks’. C. Wright Mills, ‘The Nazi Behemoth’ [1942], in Power, Politics and People (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 170-78, at 177, 176.

57 Mills, The Causes of World War Three, 139.

58 Mills, ‘Culture and Politics’, 246.


60 Mills, ‘The Decline of the Left’, 225.


62 C. Wright Mills, ‘Den fjerde epoke’, Vindrosen: Gyldendals litterære magasin, 7, no. 6 (1960), 443-661, at 452; C. Wright Mills, ‘The Cultural Apparatus’ [1959], in


68 Mumford, *The Transformations of Man*, 244.


72 Lewis Mumford to Norman Cousins, 8 November 1957, SANE, Inc. Records (DG 058), Swarthmore College Peace Collection, Series B: Records of the National Office of SANE, New York, NY, Correspondence, 1957-1966, Box 4, “Mumford, Lewis”.

73 D. Geary, Radical Ambition: C. Wright Mills, the Left, and American Social Thought (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009); Brewer, ‘C. Wright Mills on War and Peace’.


75 Geary, Radical Ambition, ch. 6.


77 According to John Brewer it sold 100,000 copies and extracts appeared in The Nation and Harpers. Brewer, ‘C. Wright Mills on War and Peace’, 184.


Nowhere was this more apparent than in debates about global futures and future studies. In this field, positions quickly hardened between those emphasizing anticipation – an attempt at mastery based on turning the present into the future – and those insisting on keeping futures, particularly global futures, open. Mills died before this debate really took off, whereas Mumford became a prominent voice. See Jenny Andersson and Sibylle Duhautois, ‘Futures of Mankind: The Emergence of the Global Future’, in The Politics of Globality since 1945: Assembling the Planet, ed. R. van Munster and C. Sylvest (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016); van Munster and Sylvest, Nuclear Realism, ch. 5.


Geuss, Philosophy and Real Politics, 25.

Geuss, Politics and the Imagination, 69.