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A Realistic Utopia?:
Nancy Fraser, Cosmopolitanism and the Making of a Just World Order

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Abstract
Nearly two decades after the end of the Cold War, academics, policy makers and commentators continue to be puzzled by the shape, form and content of contemporary world politics. The fluidity of the post-Cold War era has seen the elevation of largely functional explanations for '*why*' things are to a more transcendent set of ideas about '*how*' social relations can be made afresh. This shift from ideology to utopia is no idle problem for what it tends to generate are images which often lie outside of historical experience, and time and place specificities. This article is an attempt to provide a corrective to, at least, parts of this malady by carrying out a *zeitdiagnose* which questions some of the taken-for-granted assumptions about the current period, in particular the schema offered by the prominent cosmopolitan thinker, Nancy Fraser. The article looks in detail at the historical basis of Fraser's current work, comparing these both to similar visions prevalent in the inter-war years and to contemporary programmes based on the theory of the democratic peace and the policy of democracy promotion. The article develops a construct – realistic utopias – which aims to build *from* history *to* mid-range abstractions rather than *from* general abstractions *to* events on the ground. As a result, it is argued, a more developed link can be made between theory and practice, abstraction and history, normative project and institutional reality.

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Beware the utopians[1]

'Beware the utopians, zealous men certain of the path to the ideal social order'.
Ian McEwan, *Saturday*, Vintage: London, pp. 276-7.

Nearly two decades after the end of the Cold War, academics, policy makers and commentators continue to be puzzled by the shape, form and content of contemporary world politics. While the period immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union was met, for the most part, by triumphalist proclamations of the 'end of history' (Fukuyama, 1992) much political discourse during the 1990s turned to more pessimistic, even apocalyptic, visions of 'the clash of civilisations' (Huntington, 1994), 'the coming anarchy' (Kaplan, 1994), and the 'new world disorder' (Anderson, 1992). It is these latter images which seem vindicated by recent events – 9/11, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the challenge posed by a vicissitude of new security threats from airborne diseases that fail to recognise borders to the sustained exploitation of the world's natural resources. Despite this, more optimistic voices continue to be heard: those who highlight the possibilities of a new 'global covenant' fostered by social democracy (Archibugi et al, 1998; Jackson, 2003; Held, 2004), those who focus on the growing significance of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and new social movements which band together in an apparently burgeoning global civil society (Kaldor, 2003; Barber, 2004; Falk, 2004), those who exalt in the peace and prosperity generated by the European Union as it expands to the east and south (Habermas, 2001; Rifkin, 2004; Leonard, 2005; Münkler, 2007), as well as those who support the broader development of 'governance without government' as represented by the spread of international organisations and international regimes over increasing numbers of issue areas and regions around the world (Rosenau and Czempiel, 1992; Shaw, 2000). So it is that lines are drawn, visions are polarised, and debate commences.

Of course, if so many learned commentators are convinced that the current historical period represents some kind of unique opening in which things are, at least to some extent, 'up for grabs', then it is not unreasonable to assume that something interesting is going on. But what? Is it the doomsayers or the romantics who are generating the more compelling insights into the unsettled topography of contemporary world politics? Perhaps unsurprisingly, the answer is neither. More interestingly, it turns out that both groups are wrong for the same reason – they are allowing the general fluidity of the post-Cold War era to cloud their political judgement. In short, utopia is running ahead of reality. This is not unusual – in periods of uncertainty, ideology often becomes elevated from a broadly functional explanation for 'why' things are to a more transcendent set of ideas about 'how' social relations can be made afresh (Mannheim, 1960; Ricoeur, 1986; Mann, 1986; Kumar, 1987). Yet the shift from ideology to utopia is no idle problem, for what it tends to generate are images which often lie outside, beyond or on top of history rather than visions which take their roots from what is immanent within history. This article is an attempt to provide a corrective to, at least, parts of this malady by carrying out a *zeitdiagnose* (diagnosis of our times) which questions some of the taken-for-granted assumptions about the current period, seeking to develop concrete abstractions which are grounded in 'actually existing' conditions. The result are 'realistic utopias' which build from history to mid-range abstractions rather than universal utopias which work from general abstractions to events on the ground. This construct is, perhaps, more modest than those offered by both utopians and dystopians alike. Indeed, it is an attempt to steer, nudge and guide world historical processes rather than to transform them from some kind of *tabula rasa* (Wendt, 2001).

The starting point for this paper is an engagement with the work of leading cosmopolitan thinker, Nancy Fraser. Fraser's schema, as outlined below, provides a compelling framework for exploring the possibilities of cosmopolitanism in the post-Cold

War world. But there is a fundamental problem in Fraser's work which risks doing harm to her general project. For, if ideas of justice and progress are to be rooted in actually existing historical conditions, then careful thought needs to take place into what history is actually providing in terms of raw materials. For those, like Fraser, who are committed to a critical, normative diagnosis of the current conjuncture and who are engaged in transformative framing in which issues of justice can reach beyond existing political boundaries, there needs to be more clarity about what is being transformed, and where and when this is likely to succeed. The argument proceeds in four sections. First, the broad dimensions of Fraser's thinking are outlined and its principal limitations assessed. The second section looks in more detail at the specific normative frames employed by Fraser, examining their historical, temporal and spatial dimensions. In the third part, an alternative analysis of the current conjuncture is outlined, drawing on the work of the British historian and commentator E.H. Carr and, in particular, on Carr's critique of inter-war utopianism. The final part of the paper rounds off the argument and suggests areas for further development.

The limits of utopia

Perhaps the principal reason for the capacity of the current period to squirm away from easy analysis is the sheer range of assaults being undertaken on the previously taken-for-granted ordering mechanisms of the modern era. The apparent triumph of Hayek over Keynes, the pluralisation of cultural signifiers and the rise of relativism, and perhaps most importantly, the seeming abandonment by publics in market democracies of a sense of the capacity of politics to fundamentally reshape social relations has generated, at least in the West, systemic imperatives which appear as a 'runaway world' in which citizen-consumers are swept

asunder before the inevitable might of globalisation, the market, democracy and other such juggernauts (Giddens, 1999; Gellner, 1988; Hay, 2007). Broad trends such as individualism, secularism and consumerism represent, as the German theorist Jürgen Habermas (1994) puts it, nothing less than the 'opening of organised modernity'. For Habermas, the fusion of public and private generated by these processes has seen the uncaging of modernity's social relations and the 'monetarisation of the lifeworld'. These forces, with their associated residues of anomie, dislocation and uncertainty (Gray, 1997; Stoker, 2006; Mulgan and Buonfoni, 2006), are compounded by the multiple insecurities of contemporary world politics.

Along with other leading cosmopolitan thinkers, Nancy Fraser has met these multiple challenges with a reassertion of the emancipatory potential contained within critical theory. In her most recent work (Fraser and Naples, 2004; Fraser, 2005; Fraser, 2007a; Fraser, 2007b; Fraser, forthcoming), Fraser has focused on how the current historical conjuncture – characterized as a situation of 'abnormal justice' – requires a three dimensional theory of justice centred on the master frames of redistribution, recognition and representation. This move, a return to a Weberian triad of class, status and party, represents an extension of Fraser's earlier work (1995, 2000; Fraser and Honneth, 2003), which employed a two dimensional theory of justice based around redistribution and recognition. The addition of a third dimension – representation – comes about, Fraser argues, because of the acceleration of globalisation and the instabilities of contemporary geopolitical relations which have produced an 'overflow' in the sovereign (Westphalian) state frame (Fraser, 2007a). Fraser argues that these three dimensions of justice represent holding bays for substantive economic (redistributive), political (representative) and social (recognition) relations respectively, with none determinant over, or completely autonomous from, the others. Rather (2005: 79, f.11), 'the three dimensions stand in relations of mutual entwinement and reciprocal influence'.

Fraser's main theme is what she sees as the deleterious consequences of the elevation of the struggle for recognition over those of redistribution and representation. The unintended consequence of this 'tragic historical irony' (Fraser and Naples, 2004: 1111) is a 'new obscurity … in which progressive currents lack both a coherent vision of an alternative to the present order and also a plausible scenario as to how such a vision, if one existed, could conceivably be realized' (in Nash and Bell, 2007). In other words, just as the shift towards recognition renders activists seemingly incapable of engaging head-on with the central political imperative of the contemporary world, so it also leaves theorists without the means to adequately conceptualise this order. The rise of recognition to the detriment of both redistribution and representation generates a gap between theory and practice, and turns an analytical construct into an ontological cleavage with potentially ruinous consequences, not least in the generation of acute levels of deprivation and inequality fostered by a seemingly unfettered neoliberalism. For Fraser the key to reinvigorating cosmopolitan thinking, and progressive social struggles, in the contemporary world is to understand that there must be 'no recognition without redistribution', or as she now contends (Fraser, 2005: 79), 'no redistribution or recognition without representation'.

This article does not take issue with Fraser's assessment of the present historical conjuncture as novel, nor her reassertion of the centrality of issues of redistribution. Rather, this article uses Fraser's framework as a starting point for exploring broader issues about the relationship between 'ideal theory' and historical practice. Fraser claims that any view of justice in these 'abnormal times' should be reflexive and substantive, dialogic and institutional, normative and procedural. For Fraser, although contemporary conditions share a certain similarity with other 'abnormal periods' such as the interregnum between feudal pre-Westphalian Europe and its Westphalian successor, current debates have a historical specificity derived from a number of associated trends, most notably globalisation and US

militarism. The instability of contemporary world politics has generated a 'heteroglossia of justice discourse' which 'trespasses the bounds of state-centred grammars' (Fraser, forthcoming). Crucially, Fraser claims that the role of the critical theorist in these abnormal times is to act as a 'situated thinker', working at a relative distance from social struggles while also developing analysis which is derived from the 'historically emergent possibilities for emancipation' (in Nash and Bell, 2007). Although Fraser recognises the tensions of keeping theoretical and practical orientations simultaneously in view, she nevertheless views this as a fundamental dimension of her work, maintaining the Frankfurt School tradition of *zeitdiagnose* by 'supplying a background understanding of historical possibilities in terms of which one can situate and evaluate the struggles of our times' (Fraser and Naples, 2004: 1007). As such (Fraser, 2007a: 2),

> On the one hand, one should avoid an empiricist approach that simply adapts the theory to the existing realities, as that approach risks sacrificing its normative force. On the other hand, one should also avoid an externalist approach that invokes ideal theory to condemn social reality, as that approach risks forfeiting critical tradition. The alternative, rather, is a critical-theoretical approach that seeks to locate normative standards and emancipatory political possibilities precisely within the unfolding historical constellation.

The principal goal of this article is to probe the extent to which Fraser's framework meets these demands. In the next section of the paper, I begin this task by unpacking Fraser's 'taken-for-granted' assessment of the current conjuncture to be 'post-Westphalian' as a result of the 'new salience of globalisation' in which 'democratic justice' provides the leading emancipatory frame (Fraser and Naples, 2004: 1117). Before doing so, it is worth clarifying three background conditions which lie behind my argument.

The first claim of this essay is that Fraser is offering a symbolic schema which rests on problematic ontological claims. By doing so, she is verifying a flawed vision of world

politics which acts as an ideological cover, or as a new orthodoxy, which paradoxically closes down the space for progressive praxis. In other words, a transformative intention is being turned into an affirmative outcome. Imaginary devices like that employed by Fraser require certain nodal points, what Jacques Lacan (1982) calls 'points de capiton', which pin down an ideational field and stop its meaning from sliding. My argument is that Fraser's framework lacks assured historical points de caption. Instead, there is an attempt to provide a total history which, *pace* Agnes Heller (1999), assumes that the 'world in distance' is a representative microcosm of *our* world. Fraser's universalisation of particularity mistakes, as Kant might put it, 'having *a* world' for 'knowing *the* world', in the process engendering a foreclosure which sublates the multilinearity, unevenness, and time and place specificities of modern world history. As Fraser herself recognises (in Nash and Bell, 2007), all processes of framing are fundamentally political in that they *by necessity* engender a degree of closure. As a result, any assessment of framing devices depends in the first instance on recognising, and in the second instance on making a judgement about, the consequences of externalities generated by them. By interrogating the historical and empirical dimensions which lie behind Fraser's framing, it is possible not only to locate the important externalities that they contain, but also to unfix certain taken-for-granted referent points which, in turn, opens up a broader canvass for praxis to emerge.

In essence, this paper argues that Fraser's use of free floating signifiers such as democracy, globalisation and post-Westphalia represents a hegemonic symbolic field which subsumes the historical remainders, exclusions and surpluses which do not conform to her topos. Disguised as neutral containers, these frames are actually 'always-already filled in' categories (Žižek: 1999, 100). In other words, Fraser is providing an ideological mirage which fixes and, in turn, fetishizes particular discursive frames. By pointing out the gap between the substance of the history which lies behind Fraser's claims and the beliefs upon

which these claims are premised, the intention is to open up the field of praxis, and to provide alternative positers from which to generate progressive narratives. This task is what Hegel called 'dotting the I's' – retrospectively installing necessity on a world of multiplicity, disruption and overdetermination – in order to generate shared, if partial, categories which can act as the basis for collective action. The result is intended to be a move towards a field of 'complex solidarity', or what Seyla Benhabib (2002) calls 'pluralistically enlightened universalism', which recognises the importance of generating a dialectical conversation between difference and universality rather than subordinating one to the other.

The article's second background condition is the depiction of Fraser's framing as utopian. For the progenitor of modern utopian visions, Thomas More (1516/2003), utopia had two foundational elements: first, the possibility of a better world; and second, the belief that it could be made. More built on two Greek words: *eutopia* (good society) and *outopia* (nowhere) to signify an image of another world, another universe, something better than current conditions but also man-made and achievable. Early modern utopian thinkers such as More, Francis Bacon and Henry Neville produced works of striking imagination, but they coupled this imagination with prodigious attention to detail, providing maps and alphabets, and detailing everyday rituals – mealtimes, the size of households, forms of acceptable sexual conduct and the like – to an often remarkable extent (Bruce, 1996). As such, these utopias were imbued with claims to spatial and temporal truth which were less about the idealisation of people or nature, but about better, more ideal, forms of organisation (Davis, 1984). As Louis Marin (1973; in Kumar, 1993) argues, utopias are curious hybrids of 'fiction-practice', which are at once everywhere and nowhere, and based less in attempts to transcend historical conditions than to offer a mirror to them, to critique the status quo, and to promote a novel institutional order. As such, utopias are both thought experiments *and* exercises in concrete abstraction rooted in a particular reading of past, present and future conditions.

This sense of utopia is what lies behind Fraser's schema. Her work is not only intended as a means of imagining the future, but also one based on a particular reading of the past and the present. As such, Fraser's critique of the where-from and the where-now act as under-labourers for her vision of the where-next. And here lies the crucial point. If the first two parts of this story are distorted, then what we have are 'degenerate' visions (Marin, 1973) which nullify the world rather than impassion it, and which act to close down possibilities of political agency. Utopias which provide a cracked mirror to the past and a distorted analysis of the present cannot hope to tell us much about future possibilities. Indeed, when this takes place, utopias serve to sanitise the past and to superimpose purity on complexity, acting as a 'dominant wish' or as a 'static future' (Mannheim, 1960) which fail to recognise new challenges, forms of contestation and praxis. As such, this is, potentially at least, an important shortcoming in Fraser's work.

My final background claim is that utopias – understood as prescriptions for the reordering of moral and political life based on analysis and critique of present and past conditions – tend to thrive in 'abnormal times' when the principal contours which shape social relations are in flux. Most of the time, people tend to accept explanations of their everyday lives – this is the stuff of dominant ideologies as understood by Marx, Gramsci, Althusser, Mannheim, Ricoeur and others. Ideology, in this sense, can be understood as the explanation of 'what is'. But during open times – when the 'what is' lies in flux and when understandings of the world lie out of kilter with prevailing ideologies – then ideational schemas have the potential to become transcendent rather than immanent, assuming an exceptional influence over praxis, choice and policy making. This is the point at which the relationship between ideology and utopia becomes transformed, when forms of utopia are offered as a means of critiquing existing conditions, explaining their inequities, and offering a path to an alternative future. Ideologies-cum-utopias-cum-ideologies based on democracy,

post-Westphalia and globalisation represent attempts to perform these functions and to make sense of the uncertainty of the contemporary world – to, as More understood, cleanse the world of insecurity and fear. Such visions offer both risks and possibilities. The possibilities lie in their capacity to push at the frontiers of the politics of the possible. The risks lie in the elevation of schemas built on faulty foundations to positions of pre-eminence which serve to preclude possibilities for radical contestation. It is just this concern which lies behind the critique offered in the next section of this essay.

The Holy Roman Empire redux

Fraser's attempt to offer a philosophical and conceptual apparatus which can underpin contemporary cosmopolitanism and which can root a progressive view of politics – a belief in democracy, redistribution and internationalism – on firm theoretical ground is, in many ways, extremely valuable. Yet there is a problem which unsettles the foundations of her work – the tendency for Fraser to abstract normative frames from time, space and history. The result is a closing off of political possibilities via the exclusion of non-conforming peoples, places and times. In this sense, what we have is a problem of scale and limits, the conjuring of a vision without borders in a world which continues to rely on borders both for policy making and for its political imagination (Brown, 2001). As such, the evaluation of the current conjuncture offered by Fraser – as post-Westphalian, thanks in no small part to the 'new salience of globalisation' which, in turn, fosters possibilities for generating novel forms of democratic justice – appears somewhat reminiscent of Voltaire's depiction of the Holy Roman Empire: 'it is neither Holy, nor Roman, nor an empire'.

Post-Westphalia?

Fraser's understanding of contemporary world politics as post-Westphalian lies at the centre of her work, hence her claim that the post-1989 period has seen an unravelling in 'the Westphalian-sovereign frame within which struggles for justice *of every kind* had previously been confined' (Fraser and Naples, 2004: 1116-7). Exclusions from this narrative, whether understood as discourses of human rights, forms of internationalism, or experiences of colonialism are seen as marginal to an otherwise dominant representational frame. And it is this 'taken-for-granted', 'goes without saying' Westphalian frame for political claims-making which, for Fraser, is under threat from a myriad of sources ranging from globalisation to US militarism (Fraser and Naples, 2004: 1117). As such, 'disputes about justice are exploding the Keynesian-Westphalian frame. No longer addressed exclusively to national states or debated exclusively by national publics, claimants no longer focus solely on relations among fellow citizens' (Fraser, 2005: 71-2).

Of course, the degree to which we understand the current political order as post-Westphalian relies on a prior assumption about how Westphalian this order was in the first place. Westphalia is certainly important in as much as it is a representation of a political imaginary which posits the formal, reciprocal recognition by nation-states of the political sovereignty of other like-units, in other words the process by which composite polities became caged within a territorially limited, relatively autonomous, centrally demarcated political unit – the nation-state. The standard tale usually told to students of both Political Science and International Relations is that this model was established in Europe during the seventeenth century, and then exported around the world by force of arms, before being turned back on the colonial masters, and then gradually superseded, at least in the post-modern zone of the European Union (Cooper, 2000). As such, Westphalia is at once 'an event, an idea, a process, and a normative score sheet' (Falk, 2002: 312). At the very least, so

the argument goes, Westphalia provides a hegemonic story for how political imaginaries have developed over the last few centuries, with 'post-Westphalia' acting as the leading edge of emancipatory possibilities within the contemporary frame of 'abnormal justice'.

There are at least two major problems with this narrative. First, it obscures the fact that formal sovereignty – the generative grammar of the Westphalian states-system – is an 'organized hypocrisy' (Krasner, 1999) which has consistently been subject to convention, contract, coercion and imposition. Indeed, historically speaking, sovereignty has usually been a luxury restricted to the great powers – certainly those in the colonies who appealed for the right to national self-determination based on the recognition of formal sovereignty tended to find their petitions falling on deaf ears. It was only after the Hague Conference of 1899 that attendance at international conferences included non-Europeans, and it was only at the second Hague Conference of 1907 that Europeans were outnumbered by non-Europeans. At the Paris Peace talks of 1919, Robert Lansing (in Chandler, 2003:29), the US Secretary of State, commented critically on President Wilson's advocation of the principle of self-determination,

> The more I think about the President's declaration of the right of self-determination, the more convinced I am of the danger of putting such ideas into the minds of certain races. It is bound to be the basis of impossible demands and to create trouble in many lands. What effect will it have on the Irish, the Indians, the Egyptians, and the nationalists among the Boers? Will not the Mohammedans of Syria and Palestine and possibly Morocco and Tripoli rely on it?

Wilson himself saw self-determination as extendable only to Central Europe, and the League of Nations rejected Japan's request to include a clause on racial equality in its Charter. The Bolshevik Declaration of the Rights of the Toiling and Exploited People, published in January 1918, may have extended principles of rights to the non-West but it was only after

the birth of the United Nations that the principle of sovereign equality became more widely recognised. In this sense, sovereignty – both in terms of legitimate authority and in terms of power capabilities – was a partial game during the modern period, a principle which has been recognised, both in *de jure* and *de facto* terms, only relatively recently (Chandler, 2003).

In fact, until the post Cold-War era, the broader dynamic instituted by the formation and break-up of empires has been much more important to the development of the modern world than notions of Westphalian sovereignty. Indeed, world politics in the modern era has largely been oriented around a complex system of hierarchy – differentiated by time and place – in which various metropoles have subordinated their congeries (Hobson and Sharman, 2005). Within this system, authority has been parcelled out in a procession of authority relations, or as Jack Donnelly (2006) prefers, as variations of 'hierarchy in anarchy'. Throughout the early modern period, various 'confetti empires' (Teschke, 2006), curious public-private hybrids, competed in the formation of hierarchical multi-states systems around the world, practising diverse strategies of spatialisastion and territorialisation which brought much of the world within their compass. The subsequent formalisation of land and sea empires, and their break-up during the twentieth century produced post-imperial orders, at least in some parts of the world, which ironically enough, required the sanctioning authority of imperial powers – what Niall Ferguson (2005) calls the 'imperialism of anti-imperialism'. In this way, Britain repackaged its former colonies as 'overseas territories', granted citizenship rights to its residents, acknowledged the right to self-determination, and supported programmes of modernisation, both political and economic, as long as the overarching relationship between the former colonial master and newly 'independent' states remained one of dependence.[2] It was only after the end of the Second World War that empires became widely delegitimised as a form of political authority and imagination, and even then, the post-colonial breaking of European empires required sponsorship by a superpower. The Soviet

Union ran an informal empire throughout the Cold War in which claims for national sovereignty were regularly engulfed within broader claims of political authority, by force if necessary (Wendt and Friedheim, 1995). France, Portugal and other European states maintained formal empires until the 1970s, and continue to retain dependencies today. Even during the post-Cold War era, there have been debates over whether the United States serves as a contemporary form of empire (Ikenberry, 2002; Mann, 2003; Ignatieff, 2003; Cox, 2004), and to what extent major polities such as China, India and Russia are best understood as nation-states or as (post) imperial spaces.[3]

In short, the modern era has seen the development of multiple states-systems which live off the presence of imperial guarantors. As such, the international realm, both during the modern era and further back in history (Little, Kaufman and Wohlforth, 2007), can better be characterised in terms of imperial or hegemonic hierarchy rather than by sovereign equality (Watson, 1992; Cooley, 2005). Indeed, the principal question, at least in the field of International Relations, now appears to be less geared towards establishing the importance of hierarchy to world historical development than in exploring the various logics under which different forms of hierarchy operate (Hobson, 2007; Nexon and Wright, 2007). The key point is that the broader age of hierarchy/empire subsumes the Westphalian moment within its canvas, leading us to see the logic of reciprocal sovereignty bounded or caged within the nation-state as both recent and limited. As such, if we are to speak of a Westphalian political imaginary, we should recognise that it has reached its zenith rather than its nadir in the post-Cold War world, a period in which state sovereignty – both as aspiration and practice – has become much more extensively available than in previous epochs. For those who fought so long for freedom, particularly in the Third World, Westphalian state sovereignty is both a source of emancipation and the first line of defence against fundamental sources of inequality, whether these be historical, economic or geopolitical in origin. As a result,

attempts at building broader dialogic and institutional forums beyond the nation-state will continue to run up against some all-too-real obstacles – witness, for example, the centrality of notions of sovereign authority to debates about trade, development, security, or, somewhat more gruesomely, to the ongoing conflict in Iraq.

Second, even if we limit Westphalia to certain parts of the world (mainly the West) or to a relatively short period in time (the post-war and post-Cold war periods), notions of territorial integrity and sovereignty have never been uncontested, for example by various forms of internationalism (Halliday, 1988). In this sense, issues of representation, redistribution and recognition were not always delineated clearly and cleanly within bounded sovereign states, but often went across and between them via processes of revolution and counter-revolution, and broader notions of political community such as the Islamic *umma*, various regional and pan-regional movements, third-worldism, diaspora communities, and, of course, liberal cosmopolitanism itself. Extending this point, even if we do accept the Westphalian order as predominant after 1945, then we must also accept that there were many rival forms of political legitimacy and justice during this period, for example the emergence of global civil society as invested in the human rights regime. It is illustrative to note that the formation of the UN institutionalises these contradictions, recognising as it does both formal Westphalian sovereignty as vested in member states, and the universal sanctity of human rights (Brown, 2006). Therefore, even during the highpoint of the age of nation-statism, it is possible to question the significance of the Westphalian imaginary. And what is striking about the post-Cold War world are the multivalent ways in which states are responding to questions about sovereignty (Sassen, 2006). Alongside the pincer movement represented by the subterranean explosion of authority and rights beneath the nation-state and the denationalisation of authority and rights above the nation-state, are extensive processes of renationalisation, particularly over security policy, as represented, for example, by anti-

terrorism legislation, the general upsurge in mechanisms of state surveillance, and the war on terror itself. Of course, the primary consequence of these processes is a strengthening rather than an erosion in notions of Westphalian sovereignty (Acharya, 2007).

These correctives are not mere diversions from Fraser's central narrative. In fact, the general lack of attention paid to issues of security is a major lacuna in her work. After all, central to the functioning (in fact to the necessity) of modern states lie claims as to the legitimate use of violence within a particular territory. States are Janus-faced in that they are required to provide order within their borders and to protect citizens from external threats. This double function is threatened by numerous contemporary processes: terrorist networks which cross borders and deny the legitimacy of many existing nation-states; the emergence of security communities represented by various transnational and international bodies (the transatlantic alliance, NATO and so on); problems which seem to defy borders (from nuclear proliferation to human security issues such as the environment or HIV/AIDS); and what Michael Mann (in Lawson 2005c: 494) calls 'the underbelly of the revolution in military affairs' – the striking increase in weapons of the weak ranging from the wide dispersion of Kalashnikovs to the existential, even nihilistic, threat posed by suicide bombers. Given these multiple challenges, the fundamental security function of the nation-state is under threat (Strange, 1999). Yet the extensive renationalisation by states of their security apparatuses does not indicate merely the last gasp of outmoded relics. Rather, it illustrates the ways in which the post-Cold War security environment is multiple in form and content, and operates as the fulcrum upon which issues of redistribution, representation and recognition can be premised. As the renationalisation of core security functions gathers momentum, so it continues to play a central role in the reassertion of Westphalian sovereignty within what might be better characterised as an age of nationalism rather than as a post-Westphalian era.

Globalisation?

If the idea that we are living in a post-Westphalian political imaginary conveys the first part of Fraser's frame, then the second, linked, dimension of her construct is the notion that the essential grammar of political claims-making in the contemporary world is being disturbed by an epochal change we can best characterise as 'globalisation'. Indeed, germane to Fraser's analysis is the 'new salience of globalisation, which is exploding the previously taken-for-granted idea that the bounded nation-state is both the appropriate frame for conceiving questions of justice and the proper arena for waging struggles to achieve it' (in Nash and Bell, 2007). As such, 'globalisation is changing the way we argue about justice' (2005: 69). For Fraser, as for globalisation 'transformationalists' such as David Held (1995, 2002, 2004), the spatio-temporal transformation of social, political and economic relations ushered in by globalisation requires a concomitant reordering of national, international and global institutions alongside a re-imagining of normative frames. For Fraser, the post-Cold War world has seen an 'acceleration of globalisation that has fundamentally transformed the circumstances of justice' (Fraser and Naples, 2004: 1117).

The central issue at stake here is whether globalisation contains causal properties in and of itself, or whether the term stands as a descriptive holding pen for a series of processes which cumulatively denote epochal change and, therefore, a shift in the organisation, and imagination, of political, economic and social relations. By claiming that the 'new salience of globalisation' represents the prime mover in the shake-up of the Westphalian frame, Fraser appears to be supporting the claim that globalisation contains generative qualities. And yet at other times in her work, she seems to loosen this association, depicting globalisation as a shell-term for a myriad of associated trends: the spread of finance capital, the increasing importance of units of global governance, the rise of transnational social movements, the emergence of global 'bads' ranging from environmental degradation to nuclear proliferation,

an expansion in flows of people and goods, the shift to post-Fordist production methods, and so on. The problem with this dual use of globalisation is that it generates confusion about whether globalisation contains determinant characteristics, or whether it can better be seen as an abstract container for otherwise disparate social forces. Globalisation cannot be both, at least not without confusing *explanans* and *explanandum* (Rosenberg, 2005). By merging these two meanings of globalisation – globalisation as determinant process (*explanans*) and as descriptive outcome (*explanandum*) – Fraser, and other cosmopolitan theorists, have contributed to a fundamental dilemma: what is globalisation meant to be transforming and how is this transformation taking place? Or to put this question more starkly, does globalisation contain analytical purchase and empirical content in and of itself, or is it a signifier, empty or otherwise, which is restricted to descriptive value?

There are three points of departure which follow from this first order question. First is the issue of whether globalisation contains causal properties. If globalisation is a determinant force in its own right, then it needs to be more than just the intensification of trends associated with modernity itself: the uneven, yet combined, spread of capitalism around the world, the further development of rational, bureaucratic states, the separation of public from private, and so on. But not only is globalisation difficult to disentangle from these well established *principia media*, it is not clear what the referent point of globalisation is intended to be (Albert, 2007). Linked to this problem – perhaps best seen as the 'how' of globalisation – lies a further concern about the 'when' of globalisation. While some theorists focus on the ways in which globalisation has developed over the longue-durée, in other words on how the interdependence of peoples, economies, cultures and moral codes have built up over a temporal lens measured in eons rather than in decades or centuries (Fernández-Armesto, 1996; Iriye and Mazlish, 2004), others illustrate the specifically contemporary aspects of globalisation, what Fraser terms its 'new salience'. This is a fundamental contradiction,

raising the spectre of globalisation as the overarching telos of all world historical development, and as a set of issues, challenges and frames which have only taken shape relatively recently. In other words, we have history *in toto* as captured by globalisation (or proto-globalisation), sitting alongside a claim that the contemporary world is uniquely global. Without resolving this issue, the danger is that globalisation becomes both everything and nothing (Rosenberg, 2007). Finally, there is the issue of the 'where' of globalisation. A number of theorists see globalisation as synonymous with Westernisation, or with homogeneity more broadly. But as recent research shows, the roots of the cultural, political and economic interdependence of the modern world stem from Eastern origins as much as Western exceptionalism (Abu-Lughod, 1989; Hobson, 2004). Indeed, much of the most interesting literature on globalisation focuses less on Western homogenisation than on forms of 'glocalisation', hybridity and heterogeneity (Robertson, 1992; Urry, 2005). As such, alongside a need to clarify the 'how' and 'when' of globalisation lies a further requirement to establish the 'where' of globalisation, both in terms of origins and contemporary effects.

If the generative causal properties of globalisation are murky, then it is not evident that globalisation as a descriptive term fares much better. As Michael Mann (1997), Linda Weiss (1998), Takeshi Nakano (2006) and others argue, globalisation is merely one aspect, perhaps the least significant aspect, of a wider nexus of local, national, international and transnational flows. Other than certain, albeit important, issues – the spread of finance capital, the threat posed by nuclear weaponry, the sustainability of the environment – there are precious few issues which are constituted primarily at a global level. Even these manifestly 'global' problems require states and state alliances to act as their primary conduits. Hence global trade rounds, weapons regimes, and agreements to reduce carbon emissions are fundamentally subject to inter-state hierarchies and complex state-society relations rather than behoven to global institutional matrixes. As such, it is a mistake to conceive of an either-

or choice, or a zero-sum trade off, between the national and the global (Sørensen, 2003). In many ways globalisation helps to shift and augment national state capacities rather than to reduce them to rubble; global flows form part of a complex, intricate, multilayered web of social, political and economic relations.

Finally, when thinking through the use of globalisation as an abstract normative frame, it is worth recalling its illiberal dimensions. The search for a global demos is not only elusive, but when it does succeed, it often takes the form of praise for global *un*civil society or as opposition to globalisation rather than serving as a harbinger of cosmopolitanism: terrorist networks, paedophile rings, racist organisations, transnational criminal gangs and football hooligans enjoy the capacity to organise and mobilise across borders at least as much as Amnesty International, Greenpeace and Jubilee 2000. Indeed, publics around the world seem ill-disposed to issues, threats and challenges beyond their immediate borders (Halliday, 2004). As such, steps towards generating normative, cosmopolitan frames out of the abstraction of globalisation rub up fairly quickly against globalisation's dark, often violent, underbelly.

Globalisation, therefore, contains a degree of fuzziness which hinders its utility as an analytical device, as a descriptive term, and as a normative frame. If globalisation is globalisations, if it is rooted in long-term, non-European processes rather than in short-term Westernisation, if it is layered onto and infused with other spatio-temporal processes, and if there is relatively little that is truly global about the contemporary world, then perhaps globalisation is not the most adequate frame for our times. At the very least, there are three steps which should be taken if globalisation is to be retained. First, theorists need to be less ambiguous about what causal properties, if any, globalisation contains, and how these relate to modernity's principal drivers of change. Second, globalisation needs to be defended as a better descriptive moniker than others available, with more specificity about how the global

interlaces with transnational, international, national and local flows. Third, the use of globalisation as a normative frame requires as much attention to its adverse 'other side' as to its progressive possibilities. Certainly, there are examples of globalisation being employed to good effect (Albert, 2007). But if the term is to be more widely employed, Fraser and others need to clarify its temporal-spatial field of enquiry, its generative properties and its normative content. Otherwise, the essential dissonance between the use of globalisation as determinant process, as historical sociological account of contemporary world politics, and as a site for the re-articulation of cosmopolitan normative frames will remain in place.

Democracy?

The third dimension of Fraser's frame is the association of a post-Westphalian imaginary, and an age of globalisation, with the 'co-implication of democracy and justice' (2005: 88). This fusion of democracy and justice into a conjunction of 'democratic justice' draws, at least in part, on the work of Ian Shapiro (1999), Jürgen Habermas (1997) and others in order to argue that 'what could once be called the "theory of social justice" now appears as the "theory of democratic justice"' (2005: 87). Of course, there are a number of sound reasons why Fraser and others employ democracy as a foundational element in their thinking. Despite the difficulties associated with mature democracies (Stoker, 2006; Mulgan and Buonfoni, 2006; Hay, 2007) – the muting of mainstream politics, the concerns associated with managing difference and freedom (what the novelist Monica Ali calls the 'limits of autonomy') – democracy appears to be the best means yet devised of organising political relations. Democracies tend to outperform non-democracies on a range of indices from growth to productivity, and from asset creation to social-welfare indicators such as levels of life expectancy, school enrolment, access to clean drinking water and the like. Democracies also seem to be less volatile than non-democracies in terms of economic performance, more

responsive to their population's needs, more adaptable to changing circumstances, and more capable of developing checks and balances on government power which discourage irresponsible policies. In terms of economic performance, political representation and levels of human development, democracies appear to function better than non-democracies (Halperin et al, 2005).

However, all too often, commentators take the tangible benefits of actual existing democracies and conjure them into an intangible ideal-type which obscures several important points: that democracies develop over centuries rather than months; that they take different forms according to time and place; that democracy, whatever its benefits, cannot be a panacea for conflict, inequality and poverty; and that democracies require embedding in broader social and economic relations which are just as slow moving and difficult to manage as the process of democracy itself. In other words, behind the abstraction of democracy lie thorny details, details which, in turn, serve as illustrations of the dangers of transforming blueprints of what ought to be into the actual world of time, place and history. As such, Fraser's frame of democracy can easily become morphed into support for policies, practices and theoretical positions she would not, in general, support, namely democracy promotion and the theory of the democratic peace. In looking briefly at these two issues, some of the weaknesses in Fraser's frame become clear.

Recent attempts by the United States and its allies to promote democracy around the world, by force if necessary, are not as new as they might appear. In fact, democracy building, or at least nation-building, has long been a staple of US foreign policy (Robinson, 1996; Mann, 2003; Pei and Kasper, 2003; Etzioni, 2004). But there is little doubt that the neo-conservative movement in Washington has given this long-standing trend fresh impetus. Indeed, it is precisely the connection made by neo-conservatives between the moral virtues of democracy (and the US model in particular), and the reality of US preponderance in the post-

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Cold War era which give neo-conservatism both its appeal and its central logic (Williams, 2005). In other words, an ideologically driven foreign policy, drawn in turn from an ideologically driven domestic policy (Stelzer, 2004), has seen democracy taken out of its particular historical context and granted an almost metaphysical status. What follows is a grand strategy, perhaps better understood as a revolutionary creed, which seeks to subordinate practice to ideology. To date, the results of this conversion, as with other forms of coercive diplomacy (Dragovic-Soso, 2003), have been poor, not a point which seems to have disturbed too many in the White House, even as it has attracted opprobrium from opponents both within the United States and around the world.

Similarly, contemporary advocates of democratic peace theory (DPT) (Doyle, 1983; Russett, 1993; Ray, 2003) draw on Immanuel Kant's three definitive articles for a perpetual peace in order to make a simple enough claim: that mature democracies do not go to war with each other. Many advocates of DPT go much further than this, supplementing the dyadic claim that democracies are peaceful with respect to one another with both a monadic claim (that democratic states are more pacific than non-democratic states) and a triadic claim (that democracy allied to free trade and cosmopolitian law can generate a world of perpetual peace). Some advocates go on to assert that the theory holds not only for wars but also for Militarized Interstate Disputes (MIDs) – conflicts between states that do not involve full scale war. Democracies are claimed to experience fewer civil conflicts, perform fewer democides (the murder of a person or people by a government), are more likely to sign and honour international agreements, and are more prone to playing by the rules of the international economic order. In its simplicity, and at least to some extent in its empirical purchase, DPT has achieved an impact well beyond the academy. It may be, as one of its proponents, Jack Levy (1988: 88) argues, 'as close to any empirical law as we have in International Relations

today', but DPT is also something more than that – it is that rare breed of an academic idea with wider political significance.

The ins and outs of democratic peace theory along with its many difficulties – over definition, empirical anomolies, methodology and causal deficiencies – are both dealt with proficiently elsewhere and also beyond the scope of this essay (Layne, 1994; Spiro, 1994; Barkawi and Laffey, 1999). Rather, the focus here is on the way in which, by concentrating on how *mature* democracies behave, advocates of both DPT and democracy promotion omit a neglected, and more important, part of the democracy story – the propensity of states undergoing transitions *to* democracy to behave unusually aggressively. As a number of studies have shown (Snyder, 2000; Mann, 2004; Mansfield and Snyder, 2005), the path to democracy is perilous and, all too often, policy makers support a process – democratisation – which is likely to engender domestic conflict and regional instability. Mansfield and Snyder (2005), for example, argue that the rush to hold elections in newly democratising states is foolhardly, at least as long as the central mechanisms which guarantee accountability – an independent judiciary, civilian control of the military, protection for opposition parties, and a free press – are lacking or only weakly institutionalised. Without domestic checks and balances on their power, populist politicians have a powerful incentive to mobilise support by railing against outsiders (or inside-outsiders) and by threatening neighbouring states. What is more, because democratising states have relatively low levels of infrastructural power, incoming elites are often reliant on the military to prop up their regime. Resorting to nationalism and xenophobia ensures the insulation of a new regime from its enemies – both internal and external, real and imagined.

In this sense, much contemporary work on DPT and democracy promotion misses a crucial point. It is less important to chronicle how mature democracies deliver more pacific, transparent and successful policies for their people than to work on the right sequence,

process and pace by which levels of democratic participation can be raised, a democratic culture can be generated, and democratic institutions can be established. The problem is that, although we know that incomplete, unconsolidated and semi-democratic regimes tend to be both less stable and more war-prone than either full democracies or non-democratic regimes, there is precious little consensus about what the 'right order' of institutions looks like, how long this takes, and indeed on how countries become democratic in the first place. Democratisation is a long-term, gradual and uneven commitment, and democracy is not a static check-list which can be itemised and fulfilled. Rather it is a process which must be conjoined with particular conditions on the ground and which external policies must both feed into and work within. As such, there are limits about what can be achieved – the short-term time frame of professional politicians runs counter to the long-term time frame which is necessary in order to build stable, fully functioning democracies.

The abstraction of democracy from history, time and place made by advocates of democracy promotion and democratic peace theory, as well as by scholars such as Nancy Fraser who use democracy as a transcendental frame by which to approach issues of representation, illustrates the perils – both in terms of academic enquiry and political activity – of using universal frames in order to guide research and policy making. Democracy – once removed from its historical, temporal and spatial contexts – becomes a meta-doxa, a category existing outside, beyond and on top of history rather than one which is responsive to the twists, turns and quirks of world historical development itself. Indeed, the misapplication of democracy by Fraser and her unintended associates is inherent in the assumption that static snap-shots can ever capture with sufficient rigour, depth and nuance, the reality of complex dynamics. Such schemas represent an attempt to impose order on a world in motion and to fix categories with a timeless and spaceless quality which they cannot possess. Such a step is hardly surprising – a world in flux lends itself to attempts at capturing its essence. But in the

long-run, discourses of democracy promotion and DPT, along with post-Westphalia, globalisation and other such frames, offer us relatively few insights into a much more interesting and complex pluriverse of experience. By so doing, they divorce theory from practice in a way which runs counter to Fraser's stated goals and, thereby, problematise the very heart of her project.

Realistic utopias

This attempt to interrogate the historical background which undergirds Fraser's normative frames is not intended to probe at minor points of detail. Rather, it suggests that the foundations upon which Fraser's normative constructions are built are insufficient for explaining core dimensions of either the current period or its future possibilities. An alternative story of the contemporary era would start with an exercise in historical landscaping in which the current conjuncture becomes part of a much longer narrative of contestation. It is difficult to adopt an appropriate sobriquet for this epoch – after all it is precisely its openness and uncertainty which provokes such a variety of discursive practices. Perhaps the best we can conjure is the rather uninformative, unsatisfactory and unoriginal label: the post-Cold War era. At least this epithet makes clear the central disjuncture between the current period and the post-World War II era – the opening of the international order to a range of issues and challenges which had previously been submerged within the empirical and normative framework of the Cold War. Whether the current period, in turn, can be understood as unipolar or multipolar, imperial or heteronomous need not occupy us here. What is more significant is understanding the openness of the international order within a longer-term, variegated set of processes representing the uneven and yet combined sweep of

world history (Rosenberg, 2006). In other words, what is needed is exactly what Fraser suggests: a diagnosis of our abnormal times which places them within a broader context of world historical development, which is rooted in the institutional basis of world politics, but which manages to retain a critical distance from it. As Fraser notes, such an exercise carries with it significant tension: abstraction and remoteness on the one hand; myopia and bureaucratic narcissism on the other. As such, this section attempts a difficult task: to keep both realism and utopianism in view, avoiding the subordination of one to the other while preserving the integrity of both.

It might be fruitful to begin by pointing out some similarities between the current era and another period which featured a comparable level of openness – the inter-war years. Towards the end of this period, Edward Hallett (E.H.) Carr, the British journalist, historian and policy maker, published *The Twenty Years Crisis*, a critical interrogation of the build up to war and, in particular, an investigation into how utopian dreams of progress, prosperity and peace had helped to produce, and then become derailed by, the impending global conflagration. Carr's ire rested principally on the divorce he thought many academics and commentators had produced between practice and ethics, analysis and prescription, and fact and value. In particular, Carr's indignation centred on the tendency of liberal internationalists (his 'utopians') to apply, seemingly without sufficient contextualisation, universal principles to ill-suited circumstances. As such, concepts such as the harmony of interests, national self-determination and idle commitments to a 'United States of Europe' merely worked to maintain existing power inequalities and to heighten international instability. Without understanding the importance of history, time and place, and recognising that universal principles must be tailored to meeting these contexts, Carr warned of counter-productive messianism masquerading as benevolent self-interest. As he put it, 'utopia and reality are the

two facets of political science. Sound political thought and sound political life will be found only where both have their place' (Carr, 2000: 10).

How useful and, indeed, how accurate was Carr's reading of the inter-war years? It is true, as Carr claims, that this was a time of absolutes – of belief in the benevolence of the free market (at least until the depression), of the necessary good of national self-determination (at least until Hitler started swallowing the smaller states of Central Europe), and of a general sense of hedonistic fulfilment, triumph and progress (at least until the spectre of war closed in), albeit also a period which was interrupted by what most commentators assumed to be the short-lived lunacy of the Bolshevik revolution, and the rise of authoritarianism from both left and right. There are a number of other suggestive comparisons which stem from Carr's investigation of the period – his critique was founded on claims of universality without due recognition for time and place, and on a tendency to remove context and history from political thinking and action, striking parallels with the one-size-fits-all discourse of democracy promotion, the idea of the delivery of peace through unfettered markets, or the Manichean 'with us or against us' binary proposed by both sides of the war on terror. Carr critiqued those who failed to see that Hitler and Nazism were new actors on the international stage and, therefore, not easily mapable in the same way as past revisionists, perhaps like Jihadism today. And intriguingly, one of Carr's favourite targets was Woodrow Wilson, interesting because today's neocons are often called, and with good reason, 'hard Wilsonians' (Boot, 2002).

However, it is important not to overstretch these suggestive, broad similarities beyond breaking point – there is much in *Twenty Years* that is inaccurate and irrelevant to our discussion.[4] Carr himself called the book 'a period piece', and it is not worth sidetracking into a comparison of social statics – the world changes, as do its principal relations. But what is worth salvaging from Carr's work, beyond the broad thrust of his critique, is the construct

Carr generated to help provide an alternative to the timeless and spaceless ambitions of the utopians he critiqued – that of 'realistic utopias'. This construct has, of course, been used (and abused) by many others, not least the liberal political theorist John Rawls (1999).[5] But what is especially noteworthy about Carr's construct is that it was written in a time of intense change as a way of illuminating shifts in the underlying grammar of international politics, and as a means of protecting what Carr saw as the essential goal of progressive, or as he saw it, peaceful change. As such, it is a construct rooted in the broad political and normative goals of cosmopolitan thinking, but one which builds *from* history and actually existing conditions rather than seeking to develop a blueprint of a new social order *ex nihilo*. Perhaps we might call such an approach 'cosmo-history' so as to emphasise its dual roots in both cosmopolitan principles and close historical scrutiny.

So what does Carr's construct mean? On the one hand, Carr meant the reality of time, place, history and power, of the world as it was rather than as it might be. Although Carr often exaggerated the views of his opponents (Wilson, 2000, 2001), what is worth stressing is the importance, indeed the necessity, Carr placed on recognising existing constraints on political action, principally those which were institutional and historical in content. Otherwise, Carr argued, even the most well-meaning of visions had the propensity to do harm, to steamroller differences, and to impose a monochrome reading on a technicolour world. Equally, though, Carr knew that it would neither be possible nor desirable to give up on utopian thinking per se. The search for something better, a sense of hope, fantasy and imagination, is fundamental both to human history and to progressive politics (Harvey 2003; Jacoby 2005; Jameson 2004, 2005). As Oscar Wilde put it (1891/2001, 24), 'a map of the world that does not include Utopia is not even worth glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which humanity is always landing'. But in order to perform the twin functions of utopias – to hold up a critical mirror to society and to imagine a novel institutional order

which recasts social, political and economic relations – two conditions need to be met: first, that the mirror is not distorted; and second, that such visions recognise their own limits. As Carr understood it, while discriminating towards realism meant affirming the status quo and over-emphasising technocratic, bureaucratic approaches to problem solving, an over-emphasis on utopianism was potentially just as dangerous – either silencing specificities which did not conform to type or potentially leading to the type of tyranny which was the result of many utopian dreams, not least revolutionary movements, in the past (Halliday, 1999; Lawson, 2005b).

Carr's answer to this riddle was what he called 'a constant conversation' between realism and utopia, a dialectical relationship between the first best world of speaking to truth(s) and the second best world of political action, in other words an unending dialogue between intellectual imagination and political prudence. By providing a firmer historical grounding to normative frames, Carr thought, it would become possible to generate realistic utopias which interrelated what might be possible, ideally, with what was plausible, substantively. The construct of 'democratisation-lite' offers one example of how Carr's idea might apply in contemporary world politics. This frame could originate in three complementary anchorages: first, that democracy is the best means of organising domestic relations; second, that democratisation is a long-term commitment, with uneven consequences, and which must be rooted in local conditions, histories and contexts; third, that attempts to aid democratisation should be limited to economic, political and social policies which recognise the restrictions that external forces face in aiding peaceful, democratic change. Practical prescriptions that flow from such a position would be relatively small-scale: the raising of levels of education and development standards in order to facilitate the most appropriate conditions for the institutionalisation of democracy; the further expansion of networks which support nascent movements for democratisation; the strengthening of good

governance and state capacity which can sustain a democratic society as well as a democratic polity. Such a frame would see democracy less as something to be manufactured out of some kind of supra-sensible Platonic form than a process which is limited, long-term and humble. Conjoined with this set of policy recommendations, this frame would be in keeping with Carr's aim of fostering peaceful change which was at once both normatively framed and plausibly deliverable. As such, it offers a viable example of Carr's notion of realistic utopia, one with potentially significant consequences for contemporary world politics.

Of possibility and practice

This article has argued that the framework employed by Nancy Fraser, like that of many contemporary cosmopolitans, rests on faulty historical articulations. The 'indefinite ideal' promoted by Fraser is haunted by alternative historical readings, exclusions which less affirm her utopia than demonstrate its foreclosure. Fraser's symbolic order serves to iron out multilinear historical trajectories and to conceal intricacies of time and place. As such, Fraser fetishizes free-floating signifiers that lack the remainders, externalities, surpluses, contingencies and disruptions which are central features of world history beyond her immediate zone of reference. In so doing, Fraser finds herself armed with empty signifiers which are abstracted from historical events and processes, with the result that they can be put to use by supporters of theories and practices she would most likely abhor (not least that of forceful democracy promotion) and which run counter to forms of political contestation she would most likely support (such as the Third World defence of sovereignty in the face of economic inequality and geopolitical bellicosity). As such, Fraser's discursive field is a vehicle for political sentiment elevated because of our 'abnormal times' into a utopian

schema which sits alongside, albeit unintentionally, the ill-starred prescriptions of neoconservatives and neoliberals alike.

This essay has posited an alternative frame for articulating progressive praxis, that of 'realistic utopias'. In practice, this construct calls for renewed attention to what I have described elsewhere as 'research with adjectives' (Lawson, 2006, 2007): the promotion of middle-range theory in which general abstractions (such as democracy, state and empire) are conjoined with additional explanatory signifiers (mature vs. developing democracy; market vs. competition state; formal vs. informal empire), in order to provide a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between conceptual abstractions, normative frames and empirical reality. Examples include exploration of how the general structural conditions of the Cold War played out in regional contexts (Halliday, 2005), of how time and space differentiation impacts on general abstractions such as empire (Lieven, 2001), and at how experiences of globalisation engender complex amalgams of denationalization and renationalization (Sassen, 2006). This method, relatively commonplace in sub-fields such as historical sociology and comparative politics, follows the pioneering work carried out by the Italian political scientist, Giovanni Sartori (1970) in making the case for social and political theory which works both up and down a 'ladder of abstraction' in order to test whether theory fits both with general concepts and with the available empirical material. For Sartori, this process of 'conceptual travelling' generated 'fact-storing containers' geared at unravelling the interplay between homogeneity and heterogeneity, and which combined explanatory purchase with a high degree of empirical content. Such a method seems well suited to our abnormal times in which commentators, students and analysts are often attracted to proselytising visions from on high rather than knowledge built up from a deep immersion in history and practice.

The central message of this paper is that researchers involved in mapping the uncertain landscape of contemporary world politics need to understand the limits of their visions, while also retaining an interest in, and not being afraid of, engaging in normative judgements about future possibilities. To be clear, this does not mean a resignation to the immanence of power, nor a failure to act radically in the face of extreme threats, whether these be despotism, terrorism or environmental change. Rather, it means understanding that progressive politics can only start from recognition of the complexity of the contemporary era and the multiple histories which lie behind its scaffolding. In short, normative frames of justice cannot be removed from the 'actually existing' substance of justice. Much of the time, ideal theory is constrained by the narrow horizons within which most people operate. But during 'abnormal' periods such as the present conjuncture, the role played by ideas of 'possible futures' holds an unusual grip over hearts and minds. These periods are like signal points on a broader track, Weberian switchmen offering tantalizing glimpses of how social, political and economic orders can be recast. But for all our interesting times and glimpses of possible futures, we must remember that the world is imperfect, that there is no *tabula rasa* and no year zero from which to begin again. As such, cosmopolitan thinking must be sure to retain its roots in the institutional architecture provided by world history and contemporary international politics. Utopias always require tempering with an appropriate dose of realism.

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[2] My thanks to Bren Romney for making this point to me.

[3] Certainly each of these states has an imperial past and contains a major secessionist movement within its borders, begging the question, when does an empire become a nation-state?

[4] Although Carr's book was met with invectives from numerous prominent liberal writers and politicians including Leonard Woolf, David Davies and Alfred Zimmern, in many ways, his reputation as a political realist was the result of a disinformation campaign originating in a specious review of *Twenty Years* written by Hans Morgenthau, doyen of the post-War American IR realist community. But Carr only has himself to blame – his *ad hominem* attacks on leading liberal internationalists left him open to such blowback. For more on the fall out from *Twenty Years*, Carr's subsequent denunciation and his more recent rehabilitation, see Wilson (2000, 2001), and the various contributions to Cox (2000).

[5] Rawls's theory of justice was, he argued, an example of a realistic utopia in that it went beyond existing social arrangements, but did not contravene human nature. I would rather not get bogged down into a discussion about either human nature or Rawls – there are others eminently more qualified that I to comment further on this (for example Brown, 2002; Beitz, 2000; Pogge, 2002). But one point is worth making in passing – Ken Booth (1991), an IR theorist of some renown, has also written on Carr's construct, but described it as 'utopian realism'. In this article, I subvert the order of these words, and move beyond Booth's application of utopian realism to the field of critical security studies.