

Political realism

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Political Realism

Robert Jubb

Summary

Realism in political philosophy is usually understood as a position in debates about how political philosophy should be conducted. Alison McQueen suggests in her *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times* that realists are united by four commitments: to the distinctiveness of politics as a form of activity, to politics' agonistic or conflictual character, to the fragility of order and to rejecting political philosophy which does not take seriously the constraints on political action these other commitments imply. Realism in this sense is then particularly focused on political order as a way of channelling and managing disagreement. This gives it its distinctive approach to political philosophy, which relies on interpretations of how particular political values or judgments operate in particular situations. Following Edward Hall, we can think of the centrality of understanding what role a particular value or judgment plays in a particular context as imposing what in 2017 he called a 'realism constraint'. Realism in this sense comes in three rough types, foundationalist realism, radical realism and sober realism. For all three though, it is crucial that they are able to articulate and defend an account of how they meet the realism constraint.

Foundationalist realists avoid moral commitments, relying instead on authentically political sources of normativity to give their political judgments force. This creates an additional burden for them compared to radical and sober realists. They must show that the values on which they depend are both not moral and appropriately political, which may be difficult given the way morality is entangled with many of our other judgments and commitments. Both radical and sober realists are distinguished by the content and not the source of normativity for their judgments. Radical realists reject the status quo as in one way or another unacceptable, just as sober realists focus on the significance of the goods made possible by political order and so the importance of preserving it. The power of any form of realism depends on the plausibility of its interpretation of the political situation it theorises, and how well its judgments respond to that interpretation. Giving plausible interpretations of political situations will mean engaging with a range of material, from intellectual history to various kinds of contemporary social scientific enquiry. If realists do this though, there is every reason to think that they can provide significant political insight.

Keywords:

Realism, Moralism, Methods in Political Philosophy, Political Normativity, Realism Constraint,

Preliminaries

Realism in political philosophy is usually understood as a position in debates about how political philosophy should be conducted; how to set its questions and approach answering them. Contemporary interest in realism in political philosophy can probably most usefully be traced to Bernard Williams' posthumously published 'Realism and Moralism in Political Theory'. There, Williams contrasted two different approaches to political philosophy which he called "political moralism" and "political realism". Political moralism treats "the moral as prior to the political" and so political philosophy as a kind of "applied morality". Political realism instead "gives a greater autonomy to distinctively political thought" (2005, pp. 2, 3). Williams claimed that political moralism's understanding of political philosophy as applying independently-established moral principles to politics leads to systematic errors of judgment. Only 'distinctively political thought' could get to grips with democratic disagreement or the way history quite properly shapes our political commitments (2005, pp. 12ff, 8ff).

Williams called his approach realist in part to locate it "in relation to a certain tradition" (2005, p. 2). Alison McQueen summarises the features of that tradition in her excellent work on three canonical members of it, Machiavelli, Hobbes and Morgenthau, and their relation to apocalyptic thinking. For McQueen, realists "share four commitments". First, they think that politics is a distinctive "realm of activity", and that that importantly structures its relation to morality and ethics. Second, realists relate that distinctive realm of activity to the "agonistic or conflictual" character of politics. This disagreement may have a number of sources but importantly cannot be expected to resolve itself and so will instead need to be "channel[ed] and manage[d]". Third, realists "see order as a fragile accomplishment" whose vulnerability does not make it any less significant for achieving other political goods, including justice. Fourth, realists reject approaches to political thinking "which seem to deny the distinctiveness of politics and the persistence of disagreement and conflict", and so "fail to take seriously the psychological, sociological, and institutional constraints on political action" (2018, pp. 10, 10, 10, 11, 11, 11).

McQueen's tradition is long and diverse, including not just her three often very different thinkers but others as contrasting as St Augustine, David Hume and Friedrich Nietzsche (2018, p. 7). This encyclopaedia entry must then draw some artificial boundaries somewhere in order to make its topic manageable. Just settling on precise criteria for membership of the realist canon in Western political thought alone would likely take most of the space available to it. The entry instead focuses on realist work published since 2005 and so after the publication of Williams' 'Realism and Moralism in Political Theory'. This work can reasonably be assumed to

be at least informed by and perhaps respond to that piece, and so to share a set of concerns about contemporary political theory and philosophy and an idiom in which to express them. It is part of the same ongoing conversation in a way that earlier realist work may not be, particularly when it predates the post-Rawlsian dominance of the moralist approach that contemporary realists deplore. Realism's awareness of its history can make this somewhat anachronistic, but the alternative seems worse by the same standard.

The discussion in the rest of this encyclopaedia entry will be divided into five sections. The first section will attempt to characterise realism and so explain what may be at stake in the dispute between it and its supposedly moralist opponents. The next three sections will discuss different forms of realism using two cross-cutting distinctions, between foundationalist realists and those less concerned to avoid morality altogether, and between radical and sober realists, who disagree about the value of political order. Outlining the challenges different kinds of realism face will help us to see what we might sensibly expect from them. The final section concludes by pointing towards some directions in which realism might develop, particularly as it moves on from a debate which has so far often tended, somewhat ironically, to focus on abstract methodological issues.

Characterising Realism

Alison McQueen's four commitments shared by realists capture the sense in which Bernard Williams' 'Realism and Moralism in Political Theory' is part of that tradition. There, Williams called for distinctively political thought, oriented around the Hobbesian question of how to secure "order, protection, safety, trust and the conditions of cooperation". This "first political question" is not "first in the sense that once solved, it never has to be solved again". Seeing political disagreement as involving "rival elaborations of a moral text" is a mistake, since we know political commitments are "the product of previous historical conditions... and... an obscure mixture of beliefs... passions, interests and so forth" rather than "autonomous products of moral reason". Treating our opponents as opponents shows them more respect than regarding them as "arguers who are simply mistaken" (2005, pp. 3, 3, 12-13, 13). The account of political theory Williams presented in that piece sees politics as a distinctive form of activity, centred on providing order by managing and channelling disagreement that we cannot expect to end, and which it is not helpful to consider in terms which do not focus on those features. It has all of McQueen's four commitments.

The last of these four commitments is perhaps most consequential for the distinctive approach realists take to political philosophy. It makes them often hostile to the idea that standard

philosophical methods, directed towards finding an independently determined and justifiable right answer, can resolve political problems. As William Galston puts it, realists “insist that political disagreement is very different from intellectual disagreement”. As they see it, the aim of intellectual disagreement may at least sometimes be to find the truth, but it “is much harder to believe that political disagreements reflect a tacit orientation toward finding and enacting the common good” (Galston, 2010, p. 397). If there were such an orientation, realists suggest, then we might not need politics at all (Rossi & Sleat, 2014, p. 691). At least, it would be very different. The central question for realists is not, how ought we to treat each other morally given we must live together. Instead, it is how to face “the core challenge of politics... to overcome anarchy without embracing tyranny” (Galston, 2010, p. 391).

Realists are then defined by their interest in the provision of political order. Groups who share enough physical and social space and resources need common rules about how to use them, but are rarely able to spontaneously generate and abide by those norms. They require more or less formal processes to make binding decisions about how they regulate their shared spaces and resources to allow the pursuit of their various interests and projects. Those binding decisions will need to be enforced, often through formal coercive mechanisms. These decision-making processes and the coercive mechanisms that make their results binding cannot rely on those they govern doing what they morally ought to do. The disagreements, differences of interpretation and existing loyalties and commitments which required those processes and mechanisms in the first place make that impossible.

What follows from this interest in the provision of political order will differ from realist to realist. They will have different accounts of what counts as overcoming anarchy without embracing tyranny, and what the barriers to doing so are; even whether it is possible to do so under present circumstances (Geuss, 2012, pp. 154, 160). However, this understanding of realism as focused on the management of conflicting interests, commitments and practices does help dispose of two objections to realism in general. The first of these is that realists are as such committed to an unavailable or unappealing distinctive political normativity. According to this objection, realists reject morality as a source of political prescriptions and so any prescriptions they make must be grounded in non-moral values. However, if there are any foundational non-moral values available, they are clearly inappropriate. For instance, Eva Erman and Niklas Möller have repeatedly attacked realism on the grounds that either it surreptitiously appeals to moral values or is clearly normatively inadequate (2018; 2015; 2021), while Jonathan Leader-Maynard and Alex Worsnip aim to refute five arguments for a non-moral normativity that they take to be definitive of the realist position in political philosophy (2018, p. 758ff).

The problem with this attack is that it criticizes realism for holding a position which most realists reject. As Matt Sleat has shown, the reason that Leader-Maynard and Worsnip find it difficult to identify an explicit defence of non-moral foundations for normativity is that the realists to whom they explicitly attribute that view typically do not hold it (Sleat, forthcoming, p. 2). For example, Mark Philp, to whom they attribute one of the five arguments for a non-moral normativity they consider (Leader-Maynard & Worsnip, 2018, p. 77ff), argued explicitly in his 'Realism without Illusions' that realism could not do without morality. One of the illusions he meant to dispel is precisely that realism's awareness "of the way that the exigencies of political life shape our choices and... principles... banish[es] morality". It "does not". A "testosterone-fuelled realism, in which morality and utopianism is brushed aside in Nietzschean fashion as something for the weak-minded... fails itself to be realistic" (2012, pp. 633, 646). If there is a distinctive political normativity, for most realists that distinctiveness comes not from its source but from "the weight, direction and relevance of different considerations" being "systematically... altered" by bearing in mind political order and the distinctive processes of constructing and maintaining it (Jubb, 2019, p. 362).

There are some realists who are attracted to a foundationalist account of the distinctiveness of political normativity. Enzo Rossi and co-authors, for instance, have recently defended a realism based on epistemic considerations worked up from a kind of ideology critique (Rossi & Argenton, 2021; Prinz & Rossi, 2017; Rossi, 2019). However, as Rossi noted in the survey article he co-authored with Sleat, there are two versions of the realist rejection of moralism in political philosophy, one strong and one weak. The first, stronger version claims that "it is possible to derive normative political judgments from specifically political values" and depends on showing that "moral normativity is eliminable from political philosophy". The second, weaker version accepts that "morality may have a role to play in providing a source of political normativity" and that what matters is "to appreciate the manner in which politics remains a distinct sphere of human activity... which cannot be reduced to ethics" (Rossi & Sleat, 2014, p. 690). Attacks on realism's reliance on non-moral values, rather than some particular realists' reliance on such values, assume that all realists are of the first sort. The second sort of realists should not be troubled by them.

The second general objection to realism is owed to Alice Baderin, and focuses on the way realists distinguish moral and political philosophy. According to Baderin, realists who attack moralism for ignoring the centrality of disagreement in politics have mistaken "proposing an answer to a problem about which we disagree" with "assum[ing] away the fact of disagreement" (2021, p. 1737). However, the realist focus on order only makes sense because all political decisions answer problems about which we disagree. If they did not, then it is unclear why we

would need them and especially their coercive enforcement. Realists' complaint about moralism's attitude towards disagreement is not that being willing to impose particular policies in spite of disagreement with them is anti-political. Their complaint is instead with basing political prescriptions and judgments on goals or ideals which seem only to make sense on the basis of widespread and deep agreement about a very broad range of issues. These are anti- or unpolitical, because they involve the elimination of one of the central features of politics, widespread and deep disagreement about what we should do. For instance, this is what is wrong with luck egalitarianism according to Robert Jubb in the piece Baderin criticizes (Baderin, 2021, p. 1737; Jubb, 2015, p. 679ff).

Perhaps luck egalitarians have an answer to Jubb's charge that it is not a political ideal in this sense. However, such an answer will need to abide by some version of "the realism constraint" Edward Hall derives from Williams' work on constructing the political value, liberty. This demands that accounts of our political values are worked out in light of "the historical and political question of what their elaboration requires 'now and around here'" (2017, p. 288). Otherwise, they will be left vague and indeterminate or inadequate, given what we in fact need them to do. Political opposition is not only "a basic constitutive feature of our politics", but also structured by the "concrete identities and disparate projects" of the people for whom any given political value we might theorise must make sense (2017, pp. 295, 296). Neither should be ignored in attempts to conceptualise political values. Accounts of political values which do not abide by this realism constraint risk ending up what Patrick Tomlin calls circular recommendations, which "assum[e] away the nature of the problem" they are meant "to solve" (Tomlin, 2012, p. 43).

Consider for example Mark Philp's realist work on corruption. Philp criticizes other accounts of corruption for failing to pay sufficient attention to all the different circumstances they mean to describe and judge. Their "more universalist ambitions" should be "set aside in favor of attempting to work out what is going on, here and now, in this context rather than that" (Philp & Dávid-Barrett, 2015, p. 400). Defining corruption in terms of impartiality, for instance, generates confusion, particularly in places where the absence of an effective central state bureaucracy capable of implementing and enforcing policy means that ruling requires patronage networks that cannot operate impartially (Philp & Dávid-Barrett, 2015, p. 393ff; Philp, 2018, p. 200ff). Defining corruption in that way in those contexts in effect gives an instruction to rule in a way which, at least there, is not possible. It ignores some of the particular circumstances in which the definition of corruption will be used, and so the historical and political question of what elaborating that concept requires in those circumstances. It breaches the realism constraint.

Exactly what abiding by the realism constraint demands is of course controversial, including when theorising corruption. What the features of politics in any particular context actually are is an obviously vexed question, just as it is not straightforward how they interact with particular moral and political commitments. Any account of its requirements will need to be articulated and defended, and realists have and will continue to make mistakes about them. For instance, Williams sometimes suggested that “in the modern world, only a liberal order can adequately meet” the requirements of legitimacy (2005, p. 135; 2005, pp. 7, 9–10). At least now, this seems wrong in light of the obvious success of the state-led and often authoritarian type of regime Branko Milanovic calls political capitalism, exemplified by but not limited to CCP’s rule in mainland China (2019). These regimes, found in seemingly modern societies across the world, frequently seem to meet the expectations of the populations they rule and so answer Williams’ basic legitimisation demand (2005, p. 4ff). There are however some things the realism constraint obviously rules out. Seeking to justify particular accounts of the value of equality and community on the basis of examples involving camping trips in the way that G. A. Cohen does (2009), for instance, will not do (Hall, 2016; Jubb, 2015). Camping trips are voluntary, structured around a shared goal and limited in time; politics is coercive, marked by extensive disagreement and shapes whole lives. Principles for organising or evaluating the former are therefore unsuitable for organising or evaluating the latter (Ronzoni, 2011). Just as it is not helpful to advise people terrified of the sea to swim to shore from their sinking ship, neither is it appropriate to urge people with different interests, commitments and practices to unite around a vision of the common good very few, if any, of them currently hold – or sensibly might be expected to.

The central question for realism is not then responding to objections to the idea that political philosophy should bear in mind the character of politics. The processes of creating and sustaining order in the face of whatever disagreement happens to divide us and with whatever resources there are to hand *do* matter for political philosophy. What that implies in any particular case is of course not settled by observing its truth. For many realists, the most important task is interpreting the political situations they are seeking to judge. Their judgments will rest on their account of what the values they rely on or theorise imply in those specific situations, and so their interpretations of those situations will need to be articulated and defended carefully. This is true whether or not realists deliberately avoid drawing on moral values to give force to those judgments. Whether they do that makes no difference to the importance of connecting whatever source of normativity they use to real features of the political situation.

Foundationalist Realism

As noted earlier, some realists do seek to avoid moral normativity in the way that Eva Erman and Niklas Möller and Jonathan Leader-Maynard and Alex Worsnip claim is problematic. We can call this first and stronger of the two realist ways of understanding distinctive political normativity identified by Enzo Rossi and Matt Sleat 'foundationalist realism'. It is foundationalist in the sense that it seeks foundations for political judgments and prescriptions in values other than those of morality. It avoids the sins of moralism by relying on a political normativity which is distinguished by its sources and not only by the way its understanding of politics 'systematically alters the weight, direction and relevance of the different considerations' taken into account.

Rossi is probably the best known of the currently active foundationalist realists. He claims that what realism requires is "properly political principles" which do not "draw on the same sources of normativity as moral principles" (2019, p. 640). This has important implications for political realism. For example, that realists "must eschew unexamined prepolitical moral commitments" means they cannot rely on Bernard Williams' arguments that power does not simply justify itself, since these rely on "the most basic sense of freedom, that of not being in the power of another" (Rossi & Argenton, 2021, p. 1052; Williams, 2002, p. 231; Rossi, 2019, p. 645; Prinz & Rossi, 2017, p. 340). Rossi is not the only foundationalist realist though. Carlo Burelli, Ben Cross, Chiara Destri, Greta Favara and Tim Heyse have all defended accounts of political normativity that at least accept the importance of avoiding basing themselves on moral claims (Heyse, 2017; Cross, 2021; Burelli & Destri, forthcoming; Burelli, forthcoming; Favara, forthcoming, p. 8). While their realisms draw on claims about the character of politics or the operation of power to ground their normativity (Burelli, forthcoming; Heyse, 2017), Rossi instead draws on epistemic considerations.

Rossi's aim is to provide "a new form of genealogical ideology critique" that will discredit and so prevent the use of particular suspect normative commitments in attempts to legitimate contemporary societies (Rossi & Argenton, 2021, p. 1046). Normative commitments that emerged together with a regime type and lack independent arguments in their favour should not be used to justify regimes of the very type on which their existence depends. For example, it is "ideological in the pejorative sense" to rely on the "folk moral belief in private property rights" to justify capitalism (Rossi & Argenton, 2021, p. 1052). This new form of ideology critique builds on existing Marxian views. However, it means to improve on them by resolving the tension in that tradition between scepticism "of morality-driven critiques of the status quo" (Rossi & Argenton, 2021, p. 1052) and concerns about the limits of an "anti-normative"

approach that restricts “itself to causal claims and predictions about society’s development” (Rossi, 2019, p. 646).

The folk belief in private property rights is dubious because it is generated by the capitalist regimes it legitimates: “widespread belief in the central political relevance of those commitments is the causal product of the very coercive order the belief is meant to support” (Rossi & Argenton, 2021, p. 1054). Like sex and race, the surface content of the concept of private property rights conceals the social function it fulfils, of justifying and so stabilising particular social structures. Instead of relying on the “manifest” concept, that “investigated simply by appeal to our intuitions” about its proper use in “ordinary language”, we better understand the content of the concept of private property rights through the “operative” concept, which can be established by attention to “the causal history of the concept”. That history shows that the concept is “best thought of as one of the tools employed by the state to make the social world legible... and to give structure to its rule” (Rossi & Argenton, 2021, p. 1053). This is a reason to abandon the manifest, surface account of the concept and instead think of strong commitments to private property rights as a mechanism for capitalist states to govern their subjects more easily. Understood in this way, those commitments lose their normative valence and cannot justify the regimes that inculcate them.

Crucially, stripping the ideological commitments of their normative valence by exposing their proper function does not depend on a moral critique. Refusing to abandon them in the face of evidence of their real meaning is “epistemically flawed”. The operative concept, which lacks that normative valence, provides “a more accurate description of [these commitments’] role in our practices” (Rossi & Argenton, 2021, p. 1053). That we do not move towards an understanding of private property rights which focuses on their role as a support to state capitalism shows that those commitments are ideological. They “advanc[e] the interests of the most powerful in society” and the same power they support “inhibits our appreciation of the evidence” in favour of abandoning that understanding of them (Rossi & Argenton, 2021, p. 1053).

The position Rossi hopes to vindicate is clearly meant to be politically radical. However, foundationalist realism does not have to have radical ambitions. Whatever ambitions a foundationalist realism has, they will need to be connected to and justified in terms of the foundational source of normativity it identifies. The success of these different attempts to support and substantiate the various different ambitions must depend on their different details. An assessment of the particular details of Rossi’s attack on “arguments that rely on the commonsense appeal of property rights in theories of state legitimacy” will not then provide a particularly good guide to the prospects of foundationalist realism more generally then (Rossi & Argenton, 2021, p. 1047). It will only tell us whether that particular attempt to ground

particular political judgments in non-moral values succeeds, and not what else we might reasonably expect from such attempts. Such expectations should instead be based on an understanding of the structure of foundationalist realism.

Foundationalist realism depends on 'eschewing prepolitical moral commitments' and replacing the foundation they provide for political judgments with one built on appropriately political values. There are then two basic structural problems foundationalist realism risks encountering, that the values underlying any judgments it makes are in some sense moral and, separately, that the values underlying those judgments connect to politics in the right way. The first of these two problems is that with which Erman and Möller and Leader-Maynard and Worsnip wrongly task realists in general in their attempts to defend moralism. Here, because foundationalist realists insist avoiding moralism means removing all trace of moral values from their theorising, they are appropriately seen as its targets.

It is not necessary to hope to defend moralism to press this line of attack against foundationalist realists though. Erman and Möller and Leader-Maynard and Worsnip struggle to give an adequate account of what counts as a moral value and so to demonstrate that the values on which they claim realists depend are in fact moral (Jubb & Rossi, 2015; Jubb, 2019, p. 362). Foundationalist realists run into a similar problem. How can we be sure that they have avoided any taint of morality without a thorough-going account of what counts as carrying that taint? Can we really be sure that any epistemic norms, presumably committed to the value of truth and its importance, are not moralised? Rossi complains that Williams' questioning of power depends in the end on the value of freedom (Rossi & Argenton, 2021, p. 1052), but Williams also defended the significance of truth-seeking more generally as a kind of freedom (Williams, 2002, p. 146ff). Williams meant to vindicate seeking truths to believe, but equally there are more suspicious accounts of the kinds of epistemic norms Rossi means to serve as the foundation for his critique and their involvement with morality (Nietzsche, 2006 [1887], p. 110ff). Is it realistic to think that our epistemic commitments can be completely disentangled from the modes of being and so of relating to each other that we also value, and what would be involved in demonstrating that they had been?

Any ground on which foundationalist realism relies for its normativity risks running into difficulties in showing that it is as thoroughly purged of morality as its ambitions require. There are two separate challenges here. First, any foundationalist realism must be clear about what it demands is excluded from its arguments in favour of the political judgments it hopes to make. Second, having clarified what should not provide support, it has to show that in fact it does not. These will not be straightforward challenges to meet. If "[e]this is usually dead politics", then other forms and fields of inquiry are presumably also often shaped by "the hand of a victor in

some past conflict reaching out to extend its grip to the present and the future” (Geuss, 2008, p. 42; Rossi & Argenton, 2021, p. 1053; Rossi, 2019, p. 641). This shaping will likely connect ethics and these other forms and fields of inquiry in various ways, and so sharply delineating moral values from their conclusions may be quite difficult. Similarly, insulating those conclusions from infection by the moral values with which they developed in tandem could involve a significant struggle.

The second basic difficulty for foundationalist realism is to show that the judgments its non-moral normativity supports are political. For instance, grant that Rossi shows that commonsense commitments about the significance of individual property rights are epistemically dubious, at least when used to legitimate capitalist states, and that this is wholly non-moral conclusion. What then follows politically? As Williams infamously claimed, political decisions do not show that someone was wrong, but that they lost (2005, p. 13). It seems a mistake then to attack widely-held moral commitments on the basis that they do not have an adequate epistemic warrant to play the role many of those who have them give them. The people drawing on commitments to private property rights to legitimate contemporary capitalist regimes may well be wrong, but that does not erase their political victories, whatever they may be, or prevent those commitments being used to build the coalitions necessary to win future political contests.

There is a risk that any form of foundationalist realism will end up playing “Kant at the Court of King Arthur” and informing not only “past societies about their failings” in ways which cannot make sense to them, but also their own (Williams, 2005, p. 10). At least, foundationalist realists need to provide an explanation of how their alternative normative foundations are political in a way that morality is not. Morality’s failures as a source of political normativity show that not all normativity is politically appropriate, at least so far as they are concerned, so there is a standing question about how whatever they substitute for it can play that role. Foundationalist realists see values like freedom and equality as moral and so inappropriate as the basis for political judgments, but we have at least some idea of how they might be politically relevant. They are, after all, frequently the focus of political demands and campaigns. They may need to be filtered through a realism constraint, but they are apparently plausible political values. At a minimum, it is not as clear why we should see the absence of ideological beliefs as one, at least once it has been cleansed of any moralised connection to, for example, the value of freedom. To put the same point another way, foundationalist realists face an additional challenge in formulating a realism constraint, of explaining why the foundations on which they rely have any political purchase at all.

Foundationalist realists may be able to overcome these two structural issues. If they do, then they will create a wide range of possibilities they can explore. Political philosophy which grounds its judgments not in morality but in epistemology or in claims about prudence or power has been unusual over the nearly fifty years since Robert Nozick's response to Rawls in *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (1974), as Rossi rightly points out (Rossi & Argenton, 2021, p. 1057). It is difficult to say exactly what switching away from drawing on moral values in political philosophy will allow, precisely because it has been so long since it was a standard mode of inquiry. Observing foundational realism as it develops should answer that question.

Radical Realism

Enzo Rossi's foundationalist realism is clearly intended to be politically radical. In that sense, it is perhaps as much a radical realism as a foundationalist one. Like other radical realists, Rossi tends to draw not as much on Bernard Williams but more on a different Professor from the University of Cambridge's Philosophy Department, Raymond Geuss. In the same decade that the posthumous collections of Williams' work were being put together and published, Geuss published a series of books which took a markedly more hostile stance towards late capitalist modernity and the "misshapen, brittle" political forms that accommodate it (2001, 9; 2001; 2005; 2008; 2009). Scholars, including Williams, who fail to reject the "self-serving "liberalism" of the Anglo-American political world" are doomed to "paddl[e] about in the tepid and slimy puddle created by Locke, J. S. Mill and Isaiah Berlin" (2012, p. 150). We will only find a "more fruitful approach to politics" by abandoning "ethics-first" political philosophy and instead being "realist" and so focusing on "the way... institutions actually operate in some society at some given time, and what really does move human beings to act in given cricumstances" (2008, p. 9).

Geuss' realism is radical because of its condemnation of contemporary society as unacceptable on the grounds of being "repressive, duplicitous and alienated" (2012, p. 154). However, as that condemnation suggests, it does not necessarily seek to avoid forms of criticism which are in one sense or another moralised. The point for Geuss, like Williams, is that the standard way in which political philosophers understand their activity as a kind of "applied ethics" is inadequate. The problem is not "modes of evaluation that distinguish a good from better or less good as they interact with... contingently arising historical problems of various kinds" (2008, p. 6). This is unproblematic since it is not possible to understand politics "unless and until one takes seriously [its participants'] various value judgments about the good, the permsissble, the attractive, the preferable, that which is to be avoided at all costs" (2008, p. 2). The problem is an understanding of ethics which sees it as involving identifying "a very few" "historically invariant" general principles, "formulating them clearly, investigating the relations that exist

between them, perhaps trying to give some kind of “justification” of at least some of them, and drawing conclusions from them about how people ought to act or live”. Separating ethics from “the rest of human life” and from other academic disciplines like “history, sociology, ethnology, psychology, and economics” like this is a mistake, and a particular damaging one when attempting to think about politics (2008, p. 7).

Radical realism is then compatible with understanding the distinctiveness of political judgments as coming from ‘the weight, direction and relevance of the different considerations’ they incorporate rather than the source of those considerations. Radical realists do not have to be foundationalist realists, ‘eschewing prepolitical moral commitments’, whatever those anyway might be. What defines them as a group is not the source on which they rely to give their judgments force, but the content of the judgments: that contemporary society and the politics that go with it are unacceptable, typically because of its oppressive and exploitative character. They hope to elaborate the various features which together make contemporary society unacceptable, the ways in which they combine to do so, which forces might be expected to remake or overturn them and with what kinds of consequences.

Radical realists have engaged with a range of topics. For example, Benjamin McKean and Mathias Thaler have both discussed the role of utopian thinking in political theory. McKean criticizes Geuss’ attacks on human rights as a form of objectionable utopian thinking by suggesting that Michel Foucault and Malcolm X were right to endorse human rights as a way of “constructing a new political identity... refusing identification with the state and drawing attention to its repressive power” (McKean, 2016, p. 885). Thaler instead discusses Ursula K. Le Guin’s novel *The Dispossessed* as an example of the way that science fiction can “unfol[d]... a space in which an oppositional, counter-hegemonic hope can be nurtured”. Since that hope nonetheless “remains entwined... with the world it seeks to negate and dissolve”, it meets Geuss’ requirement to avoid wishful thinking (Thaler, 2018, pp. 689, 690, 679ff). Gearóid Brinn has provided a more concrete defence of some of the forms of anarchism on which Thaler draws in his engagement with utopian thinking. Brinn argues that some forms of anarchism can be “realistic and pragmatic in the pursuit of uncompromised goals such as the replacement of the nation-state with another form of social organisation” (Brinn, 2020, p. 208). In doing so, he builds on Paul Raekstad’s earlier argument that some other realists had illegitimately excluded anarchism by wrongly characterising it as moralist (Raekstad, 2018).

These examples make clear the way in which radical realism builds on and has important continuities with pre-existing radical rejections of and challenges to the status quo. Brinn and Raekstad both refer to various anarchist luminaries both past and present, for instance, as well as to concrete examples which supposedly point to the real political possibilities offered by

anarchism, like the Kurdish-dominated enclave in Northern Syria, Rojava (Brinn, 2020, p. 218; Raekstad, 2018, p. 163). This is indicative of the prospects for radical realism. In general, its prospects will depend on those of the challenges to and rejections of the status quo it engages with and takes up. If those challenges and rejections can pass some defensible version of the realism constraint, then radical realist attempts to press their claims against the status quo will be at least cogent. They will undermine and threaten attempts to legitimate it while providing support to more direct political attacks on or action against it. And they will do so while drawing on an account of 'how institutions actually operate and what does really move human beings to act', and so while observing the requirements of the realism constraint.

As we have already noted, what counts as a defensible version of the realism constraint is bound to be controversial, and it would be a mistake to attempt to settle it here. As Williams put it, "what the conditions of modernity are, what forms a modern society can intelligibly take, and so on... is the substance of much significant political argument". Complaints against particular forms of social organisation may be "more sensible than conventional opinion supposes", just as whether they are sensible may be irrelevant if the "aim... is to change the world". If enough people can be convinced that the complaint is important – that the resentment on which it is based is real and requires a response – then the "conception of a social world in which it is not frustrated" may cease to be "a fantasy" (2005, pp. 91, 92, 93). Radicalism does not in itself breach the realism constraint, and any account of the realism constraint which necessarily had that implication would presumably be inadequate in light of the many radical political changes which in fact have occurred, at many different times and in many different places.

The need to defend any particular account of the realism constraint cuts both ways though. Whatever material radical realists use in their critiques of the status quo will presumably be open to a range of interpretations. Consider McKean's use of Foucault's and Malcolm X's accounts of human rights as the basis for a new political subjectivity that could unite various oppressed and marginalised groups. These predate Geuss' and Williams' criticisms of human rights by decades (McKean, 2016, p. 883ff), and even if they were realistic at the time they were made, may well no longer have been once their context, of Cold War conflict, decolonisation and the non-aligned movement, had disappeared to be replaced by a largely unipolar international order in which the protection of human rights could be invoked by the global hegemon as part of the basis for military interventions across the globe and most notably in West and Central Asia. Similarly, Thaler's use of *The Dispossessed* to argue against the anti-utopianism of the liberalism of fear depends on reading that novel's plot in one way (Thaler, 2018, p. 690), when others also appear available. Shevek, the novel's protagonist, leaves his anarchist society after his scientific work has been both stolen and stymied by another scholar who is able to dominate

the scientific community in a way that the society's anti-hierarchical principles ought to prevent. He is nearly murdered by an angry mob as he does so (Guin, 2002 [1974], pp. 197ff, 8). These are themes which seem at least capable of speaking for and not against the liberalism of fear's focus on "the inevitability of that... power which is called government" and "asymmetries of power and powerlessness" it creates (Shklar J. , 1989, p. 27; Williams, 2005, p. 60).

Perhaps the interpretations McKean and Thaler offer can be vindicated. Similarly, perhaps Lorna Finlayson's claim that "the large majority" of those living under the sorts of regimes preferred by liberals are "well and truly screwed by them" can be defended as remaining faithful to an injunction to take seriously 'how institutions actually operate and what does really move human beings to act' (2017, pp. 275, italics suppressed). If the bulk of the population living in North Atlantic societies is so thoroughly exploited and dominated by them, it should be possible to show that. Substantiating that kind of claim though is the challenge that radical realism faces. Like any form of realism, it needs to work with the materials granted by politics both in a generic sense and as going on at some particular time and in some particular place. This does not necessarily rule out making morally-inflected claims any more than it rules out unrelenting criticism of the status quo. What it does require though is both fidelity to the material itself and a willingness to see that it can be understood in more than one way.

Sober Realism

Sober realism doubts that many of the claims made by radical realists can pass a defensible version of the realism constraint. Its self-understanding is of an awareness of the limits of political possibility and the risks associated with pushing at them. Sober realists are likely to see radical realists as having forgotten, much as moralists have, that "political authority has a point because... there would be disorder, conflict, or chaos without it" and that the "ubiquity" of those threats gives it a "continuing role" to provide goods "that are unrealizable without coordinated action" (Philp, 2007, p. 61). For sober realists then, political philosophers and theorists should constantly have in mind the constraints that the need to sustain political order imposes. In this sense, the archetypal error in political thinking for sober realists is the one made by John Rawls in deprecating *modus vivendi* as "mere" (2005, p. 146). Those who live under "equilibria based on perceptions of mutual advantage" are "already lucky", given the damage we know political instability and the breakdown of order can do. Anyone who ignores that by denigrating such arrangements as 'mere' necessarily places themselves at a "certain distance from the political" (Williams, 2005, pp. 2, fn. 2).

Sober realism's caution has been extensively criticised, both by self-defined moralists and by more radical realists (see for instance respectively Erman & Möller, 2018; Finlayson, 2017). And indeed at times sober realism has tended towards a form of interpretivist political quietism, although at least as much on grounds of uncertainty about what more political philosophers and theorists might distinctively say as for a lack of complaints about how political orders are arranged and the effects they bring about (Horton, 2017; Horton, 2010, p. 444ff). However, sober realism does not always have to accept the status quo. Thinking that it is important to take the need to provide order seriously does not mean also thinking that the only thing we can hope to do is provide order. The restrictions that need imposes on other political ambitions may be tighter or looser, and vary according to which other goals we hope to pursue and with what means. Robert Jubb, for instance, has not only used a sober realism to defend a comparatively demanding form of egalitarian politics as a goal and a potential condition of a regime's legitimacy, but twice to suggest that political rioting can be a basically reasonable response to some of the iniquities of late capitalist representative politics (2015, p. 689; 2019, p. 966). That does not seem to be a reification of political order in the way that sober realism's critics sometimes claim it must involve.

Sober realists have addressed a range of topics. The posthumous collection of Bernard Williams' writings which contains 'Realism and Moralism in Political Theory' also contains essays on the liberalism of fear, human rights, liberty as a political value, toleration, the right to intervene and the significance of truth and self-deception in politics, all of which make recognisably sober realist points (2005; 2005; 2005; 2005; 2005; 2005). As well as an example of Mark Philp's work on corruption (2018), Matt Sleat's 2018 edited collection of realist work also includes sober realist chapters by Richard Bellamy on the role of leadership and Rahul Sagar on transparency (Sagar, 2018; Bellamy, 2018; Sleat, 2018). Sleat himself is a sober realist who, as well as working on legitimacy and liberalism's inevitably coercive relation to those who reject it (2013; 2013), has reinterpreted the responsibility to protect as a political, rather than primarily moral, doctrine and argued that existing understandings of a *casus belli* can accommodate the rise of so-called cyber attacks (2016; 2018). We have already noted Alison McQueen's exploration of the relation between three canonical realist thinkers, Machiavelli, Hobbes and Morgenthau, and the possibility of apocalypse. McQueen has also explored the relation between realism in political philosophy and in international relations (2017; 2018), as has William Scheuerman (2013; 2018). His emphasis on the importance of legality and civility in political protest could also easily be read as a kind of sober realism (2015; forthcoming).

The question for these and any other sober realist pieces of work is not then whether they unthinkingly affirm or somehow support the status quo. If they do affirm or otherwise support

the status quo, this is not because their methods oblige them to do so. It is because they interpret the political situation they consider in a way which they think provides a case for affirming or supporting the status quo. And of course deciding what counts as affirming or supporting the status quo itself may require an interpretation of that self-same situation. Otherwise, it will not always be quite clear just what the status quo is and why particular positions support or affirm it, let alone why doing so might be as problematic as that accusation suggests.

Some sober realists are also foundationalist realists (Burelli & Destri, forthcoming), just as some radical realists also are. They face the additional challenges associated with attempting to demonstrate that they have excluded all morality from the sources of normativity on which they draw, as well as that those sources are appropriately political. Otherwise, though, what sober realists need to do is offer a sober account of however “the need to impose order and discipline and to coordinate and conciliate people’s conflicting interests and activities” does, can and should play out in the contexts they mean to address, and draw on it to judge whatever it is about those contexts they hope to assess (Philp, 2007, p. 9). They will need to demonstrate that their accounts of political values and norms, and their relation to political decisions, policies, practices and institutions, whether actual or proposed, meet a defensible version of the realism constraint. This is the same challenge that radical realists face. As with radical realists, sober realists will not be able to make many, if any, interesting or significant claims without engaging in controversial or at least contestable interpretations of the political situations those claims take as their subject. That is as things ought to be though: such interpretations are “the materials of political persuasion” and that “is what we should be engaged in” (Williams, 2005, p. 93).

For example, Paul Sagar has drawn on István Hont’s work on the rise of commercial society in Europe in the eighteenth century to criticize much contemporary political philosophy. For Hont and Sagar, “the egalitarian component” of the liberal egalitarianism that has dominated political philosophy since Rawls – and indeed any more radical position than Rawls’ – “is really a continuation of [an] older republican, or civic humanist, view”. This view became untenable in “the changed material circumstances of the modern open commercial state operating a luxury economy” that emerged in the eighteenth century in Europe, yet those are, if Hont is right, “the conditions which ground all of our present political problems and possibilities”. This, Sagar argues, means that liberal egalitarianism should orient itself not towards “pre-political rights” or “the need to respect... the autonomy of rational equals” but its “historical success” and particularly the importance of avoiding “a return to the horrors of the last century”. However, as Sagar acknowledges, doing so will mean engaging not just with intellectual history but with

“full-blooded historical analysis of social change” (Sagar P. , 2018, pp. 487, 490, 495). That though will inevitably mean confronting and engaging with different accounts of the transition to modernity, accounts which are sceptical of story Hont tells and which Sagar adapts about how “the commercial future many eighteenth-century observers imagined as plausible has become our historical present” (Hont, 2005, p. 156).

Prospects for Realism

Generally, the prospects for realism depend on meeting the challenge of showing how the judgments it makes pass a defensible realism constraint. Foundationalist realists face additional challenges created by their insistence on removing any reliance for significance on moral values from their judgments, but that can perhaps be understood as one of the requirements they impose on a defensible realism constraint. If realists are correct, though – as this entry has suggested they are – that is not a challenge they alone face. Any plausible account of a political value will involve, implicitly or explicitly, passing one version or another of a realism constraint. Accounts which ignore central features of political life, whether generically or in particular situations, will be inadequate in the situations whose basic structure they treat as irrelevant.

Political philosophy more broadly seems to have turned towards greater engagement with the details of politics over the past fifteen or so years. At around the same time that the posthumous collection of Bernard Williams’ political theorising was published, various other challenges to the standard mode of post-Rawlsian political philosophy were also gaining ground. Like realism, none of these were really new, but for whatever reason, they rose to take a significant role in the second part of the first decade of this century. There were criticisms of the idealised character of much political philosophy and the way this insulated it from real political issues, as well as arguments which claimed that interpretations of practices should play a much more central role in political philosophy (Mills, 2005; Sen, 2006; Sangiovanni, 2008; Ronzoni, 2009). Although realists have engaged with this broad turn to political reality in political philosophy, the main thrust of this engagement has often been to draw distinctions between their activity and that of so-called non-ideal theorists or to suggest that more attention ought to be paid to them (Sleat, 2016; Jubb, 2016). More engagement seems sensible and is beginning. For example, Paul Sagar has both drawn on ethnographic work to provide an account of legitimacy and contributed to a critical exchange calling for it to be used more frequently in political philosophy, acknowledging its potential significance for realism (Zacka, et al., 2021; Sagar P. , 2018). Equally, some of those critical of the modes of reasoning standard in contemporary political philosophy have turned their attention to realism and its claims. Both Thomas Fossen and Simon Hope, for example, have queried the form of practical reasoning involved in realism, and there may be much than

realists can learn from pragmatist and other critiques of idealisation in political philosophy (Fossen, forthcoming; Hope, 2020). All of this may help realists give more plausible accounts of the ways in which the judgments they make relate to defensible accounts of what the political world is actually like.

There are various topics in and areas of political philosophy where realists might hope to be able to make such judgments. On the one hand, they may place themselves in conversation with other scholars also sceptical about the power of the kind of political philosophy they characterise as 'applied morality' or 'ethics-first'. Samuel Bagg's work, for instance, is exemplary of growing trend towards more concrete assessments of political institutions and the way they work in democratic theory (see for instance Bagg, 2018; Klein, Forthcoming). Drawing on his work and that of others could help realists explore the democratic challenges we undoubtedly face. On the other hand, there are areas of political philosophy which seem so far comparatively untouched by realism. For instance, the political philosophy of climate change has so far largely been dominated by highly moralised questions about the just distribution of the burdens of addressing anthropogenic warming (Gardiner, 2013). A more realist perspective might then provide useful insights about the politics of climate change which are after all, no more likely than any others to achieve justice, and so Alison McQueen's recent work may open ground for others too (2021; 2018, p. 202ff).

In taking up these topics, and surely others, realists will be successful if they can offer realistic interpretations of the politics they hope to understand and assess. This will often involve drawing on figures in their canon whom this entry, in order to control its scope, has almost completely ignored. The realist tradition covers much of the history of political thought before the dominance of the moralism associated with John Rawls, but perhaps often most similar to the style of one of his first critics, his colleague Robert Nozick. There is inevitably then much realists can and have learnt from the history of political thought. It is not only the history of political thought or intellectual history more broadly that will be relevant to realism though. Paul Sagar is right that social and political history will often be at least as important as the history of attempts to analyse and interpret what it documents. It is on the basis of that understanding of the development of contemporary political and social practices and institutions, along with similar engagement with work in contemporary social science, that realists will be able to offer the plausible political judgments they charge moralism with having failed to supply.

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