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## Review

# Politics recovered: Realist thought in theory and practice

Matt Sleat (ed.)

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In the Anglo-American world, political theory only took the shape it has today in the early 1970s. Recently, ‘realism’ has emerged to argue that this project rests upon a fundamental mistake: it confuses the proper relationship between politics and ethics. It takes what Raymond Geuss calls an ‘ethics first’ approach. The theorist selects a handful of ethical categories and intuitions, works them up into a general theory of how the world ought to be, and only *then* turns to the real world. On this view, we do not need to know anything about politics, history, economics or sociology to formulate ethical guidance for politics; we only need take heed of these things in the ‘application’ of an antecedently specified ethical theory. Realists believe, on the contrary, that we have to *start* with these realities.

Realism is less than 10 years old. *Politics Recovered* is therefore apt to serve as something of a milestone. It shows us how far realism has come. But it is also a constructive display of how realism might consolidate itself as a serious rival to mainstream political theory. The format is apposite: only a collection could have the breadth and diversity to speak across a project as amorphous as realism. Matt Sleat, the editor, has been at the centre of realism from the very start. The volume opens with a careful *tour d’horizon* of realism by Sleat. It closes with a series of incisive criticisms from Michael Freeden, writing from the perspective of his own influential approach to political thought and ideologies. These make for perfect bookends. Between them, we find thirteen chapters, delivered by a finely balanced cast: Charles Larmore, Glen Newey, David Owen, William A. Galston, Paul Sagar, John Medearis, Richard Bellamy, Mark Philp, Rahul Sagar, Alison McQueen, William E. Scheuerman, Duncan Bell, and Elizabeth Frazer.

Realism’s greatest problem was present at its inception: it emerged as a *countermovement*. What held it together was something negative, the failure of political theory to engage with the realities of politics. It was always going to be difficult to extract a positive approach to political theory out of this inchoate



beginning. What is most remarkable about this collection, then, is that realism is made to stand on its own two feet. It is not an exercise of negativistic destruction. In fact, very little of book deals with realism's antagonist, 'moralism'. But realism is not founded upon doctrinal unity. Sleat emphasises that realism is, and perhaps must be, a 'family of different approaches' (p. 2).

Looking at the collection as a whole, three broad themes stand out. First, there is a concerted attempt to make sense of realism's place within the history of political thought. Sleat starts the book by reciting the dialogue between Socrates and Callicles in Plato's *Gorgias*. David Owen reflects upon the admiration Bernard Williams and Geuss have for Thucydides' perceptive and non-moralised human psychology. Richard Bellamy claims Machiavelli's *The Prince* for realism. John Medearis finds within John Dewey's work an exemplary 'democratic realist', an argument that is of especial significance for two reasons: because Medearis rightly argues that Dewey has a sophisticated account of human agency and modern life, and because there are important and largely overlooked lines of convergence between realism and pragmatism.

There is a significant subplot to this process of historical self-location, however. For at the same time as realism was emerging within political theory, there was a parallel movement taking place within 'International Relations' (IR). Scholars were returning to the 'classical' realists of mid-century IR – most notably Hans Morgenthau, E.H. Carr, and Reinhold Niebuhr – to scrape away the caricatured account of *Realpolitik* that has been foisted upon them, and to bring to light several highly sophisticated thinkers. It is thus startling that realists within political theory have, with few exceptions, ignored this development. *Politics Recovered* is, in this respect, a major corrective. Alison McQueen makes a convincing case for the affinity of classical realism and political realism, before setting out several of the lessons to be learned from classical realists. William E. Scheuerman, meanwhile, brings Morgenthau, Schmitt and Williams into a scintillating three-way dialogue.

Second, Williams provides the text with its theoretical centre of gravity. Of fifteen chapters, eight engage with Williams' political realism at length. Williams was, of course, a brilliant thinker. But there is additional reason for his prominence. The most common objection raised against realism is that, whether we start with the realities of politics or not, sooner or later we shall need to know how things should be, and not simply how things are, and for that we will need a moral theory. Williams offers a convenient reply: we can ground normativity in politics itself. This is because Williams argues that: (i) the 'first' question of politics is the provision of order and security, and (ii) this question is only answered when a state is legitimate, i.e. when it offers an acceptable justification of itself to those subjects it rules over, because (iii) if it does not do this, we are not witnessing politics, but warfare: the condition that politics is supposed to be the solution to. Thus a normative standard – legitimacy – is made inherent to politics. Three essays directly respond to this argument.



Larmore argues that Williams was wrong to suggest that legitimacy does not depend upon a morality prior to politics, because the foundation of any justification for a regime (e.g. the divine right of kings) will be moral in character. Paul Sagar dissects one of the most difficult parts of Williams' argument, the so-called 'Critical Theory Principle', arguing that this could provide the *general* basis for a normative critique grounded in politics. Last but not least, David Owen reflects on Williams' ethical naturalism, and asks whether political realism might not depend, as it did for Williams, upon a realist orientation toward human life in general.

These debates reverberate throughout the text. It is highly notable that Williams provides the nomenclature for its realism: it is a specifically *political* realism, focusing upon establishing a general normative theory, centred on order and legitimacy, to rival the theories of justice that dominate political theory. This is a needed corrective. But it has meant, in practice, that to be 'realistic' is to focus squarely upon 'the political'.

But as Scheuerman cautions, there is a danger here. For politics is a composite part of a wider historical, sociological and economic field, whose concrete manifestations and immanent possibilities change from moment to moment. In trying to identify the most general qualities of politics, and treating them as both exhaustive of politics, and effectively unchanging, much will be lost.

It is thus worth pointing out that Geuss (2008) – who is sometimes placed alongside Williams as a foundational thinker for realism – uses the language of 'realism', instead of 'political realism', rejects the search for a general ontological specification of politics, and tries to get at politics through a *series* of questions that focus on its relation to a far wider social field. Unfortunately, Geuss' iconoclasm and lack of academic decorum has earned him the ire of many (Larmore calls him 'silly'). But his approach has the resources, perhaps, to rebalance realism.

In fact, the third thematic cluster of the collection, a series of analyses of concrete political problems, shy away from this kind of formalism. Bell advises that realists have generally failed to develop 'empirical accounts of international politics', despite the fact that 'any truly realistic political theory today must place questions of geopolitics and global capitalism at its core' (p. 296). Bell goes on to ask a simple but neglected question: how can global justice be made politically feasible, accepting the premises of realism? He considers the possibility of reframing poverty as a *security* issue that falls under the national interest of states – a strategy that, Bell warns, is not without risks. Discussing corruption, Philp argues that politics is not a self-consistent activity, but differs in fundamental respects across societies, and thus Western observers can hardly proclaim that a political system is corrupt simply because it deviates from the model of politics that prevails in the West. Frazer makes the case for a feminist realism. On Frazer's accounting, feminism is a programmatic project that attempts to critically explain sexism, while remaining cognizant of conflict and dissent, and of the empirical complexities of intersectional oppression, in order to imagine and build a new reality. All three of



these essays emphasise that realism, if it is to succeed, has to get to grips with the messy work of empirical analysis.

This raises an important question: what role is there for *philosophy* in a genuinely realist project? It is difficult to pledge a fidelity to the ‘reality’ of politics without leaving the hermetic syllogisms of philosophy. What is required is a new kind of philosophy, integrated with the human sciences. There is an open question about how this is to be achieved. But that there has to be such an integration, and not simply a philosophy of politics, is clear.

It is a great virtue of *Politics Recovered*, of the text’s breadth and diversity, that these kinds of questions arise organically from the juxtaposition of its chapters. It is not a volume that speaks with a single voice, and it is better for it. It is this, too, that allows it to simultaneously address many of the most fundamental questions that have been asked of the realist project: its place in the history of political thought, the possibility of a peculiarly political normative theory, and its ability to become a constructive approach to politics.

## Reference

Geuss, R. (2008) *Philosophy and Real Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

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