

Introduction

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ABSTRACT

The realist movement in political thought has until recently been defined as much by its enemies as by its theses. It has often spent more time explaining what was wrong with ideal theory than doing realist theory. This essay argues that realism is entering a new phase, constructive rather than combative. It identifies three modes of constructive or affirmative realist theory (present in this volume's essays and elsewhere). The first focuses on feasibility; the second revisits the realist canon; and the third shows how familiar ideologies can be defended without appealing to the abstract or abstruse philosophical claims on which they are often sought to rely. The essay does not seek unity where none can be found. It counsels accepting that the family surnamed Realism is a large and nontraditional one in which splits and remarriages are not unknown and many prospective partners raise eyebrows.

KEYWORDS Realism; political realism; realist theory; feasibility; traditions; practice; ideology

This collection of essays emerges from a workshop held at the National University of Singapore that focused on identifying where 'Realism' has come from and where it might be headed. William Galston's famous review article, one of the first to christen realism as a definable movement, essentially defined it as a 'dissenting movement' against the ideal theory practiced by Rawls and by many deliberative democrats (2010, 386). The label 'realist' applied to a political theory came to mean, in effect, 'different from ideal theory' in one or more respects. A realist theory might be determined to provide practical advice (as opposed to justifying abstract ideals); concerned with political feasibility (as opposed to making implausible assumptions and demands); interested in rhetoric and persuasion (as opposed to technical philosophical argumentation); or eager to bring in historical and political facts as sources of good political judgment (as opposed to abstracting from real world cases and our intuitions about them).

This essentially negative definition was valuable and by no means inaccurate. Since much early realism amounted to declarations of independence from a form of political theory that realists regarded as hegemonic, it tended to be

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apologetic and ‘meta’: realists spent more time explaining what was wrong with ‘ideal theory’ than they spent doing ‘realist theory.’ Related to this, early realism was often unclear as to what it was actually aiming at – for instance, whether it aimed at immediate relevance at the risk of excessive deference to current opinion, or whether it sought deep truths about ethics, politics, and society, asking deep questions about the nature of power and its relation to truth, at the risk of abstruseness. Eager to escape the Rawlsian camp, many realists understandably cared more about justifying the exodus, and linking up with other existing or potential refugees, than about which path out they took.

More recently, however, some of the defensiveness has faded. Sabl (2015) has distinguished ‘wet’ realism, which retains a concern with legitimation and justification, from a ‘dry’ realism that rejects it. A growing number of realists are quite dry without feeling the need to stress their dryness; they do not so much reject the idealist liberal’s demand for justification as simply regard it as irrelevant to their projects. This seems a sign of realism’s new-found strength and confidence.

As the number of those who profess some interest in realism has increased, recruitment and morale have become less important than making strong and interesting substantive claims – at the cost, inevitably, of some schisms. The articles in this symposium reflect this trend.¹ In particular, they embody realist theory of three kinds that we are convinced will largely define the field – or rather fields – of study well into the future. We distinguish these three kinds of realism by their temporal dimension: the first is oriented towards the future; the second, towards the past; the third, towards the present.

The three futures of realism

One kind of realism concerns itself with *feasibility and real-world constraints*. It invites normative theory to undertake a kind of due diligence: that is, to evaluate the plausibility of its assumptions and the feasibility of its prescriptions. This is not to imply that a normative theory should have no ‘aspirational’ content whatsoever (Estlund 2014). Rather, as Galston writes, this approach seeks to locate ‘the outer perimeter of the desirable possible and to use it as a guide for action in the here and now’ (2010, 401). In the current collection, this form of realism can be discerned in Pettit’s essay. Perhaps characteristically for this kind of realism, his endorsement takes adjectival form: his preferred form of republican thought is *realistic*, attuned to real-world constraints, as well as ‘practical,’ able to ‘guide people in deciding about the political interventions they ought to pursue in their own society.’

On the other hand, Hall and Sleaf’s contribution to this model sets itself up in direct *contrast* with a ‘non-ideal’ or feasibility-based view; those authors distinguish their own preferred form of realism, one devoted to the study of politics as the source of ethical truth, from the kind for which feasibility is a central concern.

A deeper concern with feasibility might, however, render both these declarations, of allegiance and enmity, a bit more problematic. For instance, to the extent that national security requires not just occasional but widespread secrecy (Sagar 2013), we might even question the plausibility of liberal and republican models of politics, both of which require public and transparent deliberation and contestation. Thus, while making a normative theory 'realistic' may seem to involve only common-sense pragmatism, it could in fact force much deeper rethinking. This observation points to a distinction, often not well understood, between realism and non-ideal theory. Whereas the latter explains how to move towards a more ideal world given our present, imperfect circumstances, but does not question the value of the ideal itself, the former can question ideals themselves (Sagar 2011).

By the same token, grappling with questions of feasibility and implementation may require facing deeper, more troubling, and less obvious truths about ethics than those who distinguish non-ideal theory from a Nietzschean attachment to 'truthfulness,' as Hall and Sleat would like to do, might admit. When we battle the recalcitrance of domestic and international politics, we may become a bit recalcitrant, disinclined to gloss politics as harmonic and consensual, ourselves; when we look deeply and unflinchingly into hard realities, they might look back at us.

A second kind of realism might be called *historical or interpretive*. Just as a rejection of ideal theory alerts us to new possibilities regarding the future (as well as suggesting that some that we thought open might in fact be closed), it also alerts us to ways of complicating the 'traditions' we construct regarding the past. The Rawlsian story, as noted by McQueen, puts forth a deliberately stylized narrative in which societies gradually learn the institutional and ethical prerequisites of citizens treating one another as free and equal. One way in which a realist perspective can, and often does, complicate such narratives is by substituting *another* usable or monumental history of ideas, involving a realist counter-canon and, presumably, another story of historical progress. McQueen rejects this program of constructing what might be called an 'edifying' tradition for realism, fit to compete with others that are equally monumental and misleading. Translating from the history of liberalism to that of realism Duncan Bell's distinction between realist arguments and realist thinkers, she proposes ways of including a range of past writers in the history of realism without imagining that they considered themselves realists or that realism exhausts their thought. McQueen comes to praise the right kind of realist tradition, not to bury it: by incorporating a wider range of thinkers while remaining, as it were, realistic about the extent of their affinity with realist theorizing as we now do it, we can both learn unexpected things from the past and draw on past thinkers' resources to strengthen realist arguments in the present.

Less radically, but in a surprisingly similar vein, Nardin's article, which may be considered a friendly amendment to Kantian historiography from a realist

direction, is determined to show that the history of liberalism is less uniformly 'ethics-first' and 'idealist' than realists – and, one might add, many liberals – imagine. As Nardin documents, no less than Kant placed at the center of his political theory not the demands of his moral philosophy but those of politics. If an awareness of 'coercive politics' (Stears 2007; similarly Prinz and Rossi in this volume) or 'the autonomy of the political' (Rossi and Sleat 2014) are sometimes considered the hallmarks of realist thinking, then on Nardin's view we must consider Kant a realist. A political association is by definition 'non-voluntary,' and Kantianism is about deliberating the terms on which coercion will take place. At this point, however, Nardin makes the very Kantian claim that 'political discourse must identify the boundaries between legitimate restraint and illegitimate oppression.' A realist might (and Sabl in this volume does) question the status of this 'must' – that is, a realist will question whether discourses of legitimacy seem obviously important to all citizens, or just to those steeped in Kantian philosophy.

To note this, however, is to see in action the fruitful and exciting potential for historical arguments to interact with contemporary ones. To the extent that coercion and the autonomy of politics do not distinguish Kant's thought from that of canonical or current realists, perhaps we must re-evaluate the alleged centrality of coercion and the autonomy of politics to the specifically realist approach. Perhaps what distinguishes realists is not truth-telling regarding politics' means, nor a special ontological appreciation of 'the political,' but a disinclination to regard moral considerations – whether they involve justice or legitimacy – as political theory's central concern. To the extent that realists are determined to retain the autonomy of politics as a central category, they may have to state more clearly what they mean by such autonomy. It cannot merely be that the normative problems and solutions pertaining to politics differ substantially from those pertaining to private life (since Kant thinks that too). It must be more a matter of whether attention to politics can alert us to a range of ethical truths that abstract and politically unaware philosophizing tends to miss (the Hall and Sleat claim, which might be called 'enlightening' mode of connecting politics to truthfulness) or else undermine moral standards that politically unaware philosophizing takes for granted (the Prinz and Rossi claim, which might be called the 'debunking' or 'critical' mode).

This last possibility bears on the third strand of realism represented here, which is *programmatically* in nature – or perhaps 'ideological,' in the benign sense: it strives self-consciously to connect analyses of how things stand to crucial questions regarding what should be done (MacIntyre 1978). This strand aims to rethink, in realist mode, familiar schools of ideological thought. It is commonly observed (though also contested) that realism as such is more or less agnostic: compatible with many ideological positions. The flip side of this is that almost every ideological position can be fruitfully re-examined, and possibly rebuilt, if we ask what it would look like with its idealist scaffolding removed and a realist renovation put in its place.

Pettit's contribution provides an ideal example because it presents republicanism without relying significantly on philosophical arguments in defense of the claim that liberty should be regarded primarily as non-domination. While Pettit in other work certainly endorses that claim, and has supplied the grounding for it, his work here is striking for its ability to vindicate republicanism without it. Here (as in other recent work that he cites), Pettit rests republican institutions and practices primarily on the felt aspirations and the palpable, overt political worries of actual citizens. Without calling for the rejection of the systematic philosophizing that republicanism has often been thought to require, his article invites the conclusion that we could probably do so if we wished. Republicanism, in this framing, is not 'a philosopher's invention' so much as 'an articulation of a concern that all of us have in our dealings with others.'

Similarly, Prinz and Rossi's contribution here might be summarized as 'critical theory without ideal speech.' They propose a form of *Ideologiekritik* that is 'internal to the political context without being internal to the ideology that underpins that context.' This critique, which presses on political judgments in order to defamiliarize them and expose their groundings in social power, in no way requires Habermasian ideals or rationalist standards. (To the extent that Prinz and Rossi draw on philosophy, it is not standard moral philosophy, in either continental or Anglo-American form, but philosophy of language.)

Finally, Sabl offers an account of 'realist liberalism.' He denies that liberalism depends on achieving 'normative consensus' (since modern societies are unlikely to attain such a consensus); that it requires 'regulative ideals' (since visions that animate political forces do not derive from rigorous, systematic philosophy); and that its policies must 'be justified' (since such policies have, in practice, been enforced without regard for whether opponents might 'reasonably reject' them). In reality, Sabl claims, key liberal institutions – such as free speech, toleration, markets, and the welfare state – emerge or evolve because they further common interests and help to settle clashes among conflicting interests. Because they serve 'multiple and indefinite purposes,' and because they are not the product of 'a deliberate plan,' such institutions, Sabl warns, will come into conflict with each other. Yet because they derive their persistent popularity and de facto authority from their utility (in the Humean sense: widespread advantageousness) rather than from systematic normative foundations, they can 'lumber on adequately well.'

Ethics beyond regulatory ideals

David Estlund's contribution to this volume has so far gone largely unmentioned. Estlund, while himself no realist, does realism a profound service by reading the realist literature with care and respect while insisting that it make its central claims quite a bit clearer. He calls on realists to specify precisely what they mean by rejecting which kind of moral standards (as well as how their allegedly

non-moralist normativity will be able to avoid the charges realists level at the moralist kind), and what they intend in claiming that ‘politics’ can do without moral evaluation. We will not try here to summarize his characteristically careful and thorough argument. But we would like to pursue the implications of his final metaphor, which compares realists who ‘reject’ the idea of evaluating political arrangements by moral standards to those who ignore bad medical news:

If one doctor tells me I have leukemia, and I seek a second opinion, I want another opinion about whether I have leukemia, not about how acute my eye-sight is, or about how well I tend my garden. There might be good things about my health, or other aspects of my life, but they change the subject. They are irrelevant to the initial troubling diagnosis. Similarly, to “reject” the whole moralized framework of social justice and injustice, as many authors do, is one thing. To cast any serious doubt on it is another.

Let us push on this a bit.

First: to the extent that Hall and Sleat (and in a different way, Prinz and Rossi) are right to see realism as aspiring to normative or evaluative – though perhaps not narrowly ‘moral’ – truths that standard moral theory cannot grasp, they are calling not for ignoring medical advice but for seeking a fuller, wiser, kind of medicine. Perhaps realists are like osteopaths, who see that a moralistic pill cannot cure society’s ills because the problem goes down to the bone. Second: realists might deny that standard forms of ideal theory amount to a diagnosis of leukemia, a dangerous but treatable condition. To the extent that political moralism prescribes things for politics that the basic conditions and presuppositions of politics render permanently impossible, ideal theory is more like a doctor whose sole advice to patients is ‘you are dying in the sense that all humans are mortal; my advice is to hope that science discovers the formula for eternal life.’ Now, all human beings *are* mortal; and a patient (not to mention a doctor) who forgets this will make very poor medical choices. And no doubt *memento mori* is excellent spiritual discipline; a certain kind of moralism and a certain kind of realism can be fused in the form of an Augustinian outlook that sees human life as both fallen and fleeting. Still, the doctor whose *only* advice is spiritual is not much of a doctor; she does not treat illness and injury, as most of us think doctors should.

That may be the accusation that realists really mean to level at ideal theory. Fascinatingly – and the chance of realizing this is not the least valuable service of Estlund’s piece – realists’ main complaint may turn out to be that ideal theory contains too *much* deep wisdom, of the wrong kind, not too little. Realism may involve a willed and precise shallowness, a determination that certain moral graveyards should be treated as occasions not for mourning but for whistling past them. Geuss, in a passage cited by Hall and Sleat, describes the characteristic mood of much philosophy, with its unlikely, evangelistic faith that apparent moral and social chaos is ultimately consistent with an ordered and intelligible cosmos, as ‘comedy without the humor’ (Geuss 2014: 207). Realist political theory may involve, on the contrary, tragedy without the gloom.

Future directions

This volume's contributions suggest several future directions for realism. They all have something to do with 'real politics,' but very different somethings: different from one another, and from the familiar, slightly polemical agenda that realism adopted in its youth.

First, real theory might pursue the question of feasibility across many different dimensions. Again, questions of external (and, depressingly, internal) security may represent the greatest practical limitations on ideal aspirations and the greatest potential source of deep wisdom regarding political truths that we often evade. But both practical and theoretical lessons may also be drawn from other obstacles that real politics places in the way of our best-laid ideals: e.g. the 'dirty hands' fact that bringing about good states of affairs may require moral wrongs; the ubiquity of scarcity and necessary trade-offs; the tension between cultural diversity and social equality; the ever-increasing constraints that environmental damage places on aspirations to human prosperity. Many of these questions are well known to political scientists and practical politicians but have been barely canvassed by high political theory – or else relegated to the realm of 'political ethics,' which is, not without reason, considered realism's close cousin but which realist political theory might do more to reconnect with.

Another, only slightly compatible direction of study would consist of doing political thought without the capital-h History, without the aspiration to happy endings and easy reconciliation. As noted above, one version of this – present in Hall and Sleat, Sabl and others, and reformulated, rather than rejected, by McQueen – involves an alternative canon, which would begin with Thucydides and Sophocles rather than Plato and culminate in a 'postwar theory' that places Niebuhr and Morgenthau ahead of Rawls. But another version could be called even more realist than that. It would start with the Machiavellian doubt that the only source of ideas is other ideas. It might on the contrary adopt the premise that the best political concepts largely reflect – while of course also influencing – political experience, embodied in history rather than theory. It might be time to rehabilitate a kind of political theory that resembles Machiavelli's *Discourses* more than Sidgwick's *Methods of Ethics* (Sabl, [forthcoming](#)).

This suggests a final mode of realism, one that would cast systematic (and admittedly paradoxical) doubt on the superiority of theory to practice. We all know of Wittgenstein's claim that words and concepts are characterized not by neat definitions but by family resemblances. The family surnamed Realism is a large and nontraditional one in which splits and remarriages are not unknown and many prospective partners raise eyebrows. One of the family's branches is profoundly philosophical, determined to delve deeply into unpleasant truths that may, at the limit, tempt us into counsels of despair. But another branch, also recognizably realist, is very different: slightly rough and streetwise. This latter branch of the family is not without its own wisdom, though it might not

be a particularly theoretically minded form of wisdom. While its members may lack polish, old school ties, and the taste to paint (or want to paint) Justice in beautiful hues, they can usually be relied on to know what's what.

Note

1. An important forthcoming work is Sleat 2017.

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