Conclusion – Realisms in international political theory

Paul Kelly

Chapter 11 from
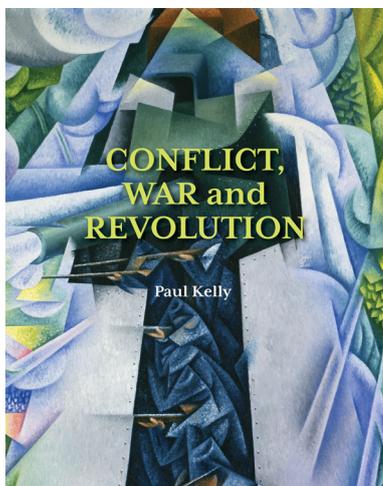
Paul Kelly

CONFLICT, WAR and REVOLUTION

LSE Press

Conclusion

Realisms in international political theory

Most accounts of realism in international relations draw on conceptions of international theory that expressly react against early 20th-century idealism. They only turn to the past to find big thinkers who support the insights of contemporary theory and ideology in international affairs and international relations theory. The so-called 'classical realists' E.H. Carr, Reinhold Niebuhr and Hans Morgenthau set an agenda for post-1945 international relations theory that is partly vindicated by association with thinkers such as Augustine and Machiavelli. Even the so-called English School theorists such as Hedley Bull (Bull 1977) and Wight draw on an historical 'tradition' of realism against which they develop their conception of the international realm as an anarchical society, by contrasting it with a realist state system that can be traced to Thucydides, Machiavelli and Hobbes. Some of the thinkers here will be familiar from discussions in works by Wight (1991), Doyle (1997) or Boucher (1998), I have not sought to write another history of that side of the argument. And I have also discussed thinkers such as Locke, who is a mainstay of accounts of idealism or moralism, as well as ambiguous thinkers such as Augustine and Rousseau. Yet, all that aside, there is undoubtedly a question to answer about the relationship between the broad sequence of thinkers considered here and the perennial interest in realism in international relations, and that question cannot just be given a yes or no answer.

   In this chapter, I explain why this book has equivocated about whether it is simply considering a realist canon. At stake is the role of realism in international

relations theory and how international political theory contributes to challenging its hegemony. To that end I consider realism as a specific doctrinal position (or even an ideology) and I define that conception in terms that will support my equivocation. However, I also want to address the development of a new 'realist' challenge within contemporary political theory or philosophy with which I am more sympathetic and to which the canon discussed here clearly contributes. These two realisms are not unconnected, but neither are they strictly related by implication. At best they share a 'family resemblance' rather than a methodology or common set of problems. Some commentators argue that the new 'realist turn' in political theory is actually older than the 'classical realism' of 20th-century international relations theory. Whether that is true or not, it has important implications for the ambition of international political theory and especially some of its recent preoccupations. Because the 'realist turn' is still defining itself, it does not yet have a settled position that can be given a history – another reason for not offering this book as a history of realist international relations. That said, I do wish to make a concrete claim that helps to clarify what is at issue in that realist perspective, and consequently makes relevant some of the thinkers covered here (such as Locke) who would not normally be associated with my realist approach to politics. The new realists are insufficiently explicit about their statism – and it is this which underpins their hostility to and reticence about acknowledging the place of violence in what they like to describe as 'the first political question', following Bernard Williams (2005).

I begin with an outline of realism in contemporary international relations theory, or what is sometimes known as the 'Westphalian system' (Brown 2002). I next give an account of international political theory (IPT) as a critique of that position, and summarise three of the most important IPT perspectives – as a prelude to outlining the 'realist turn' in political theory and philosophy. The final section focuses on the central challenge facing a more realist IPT, namely the relationship between legitimacy, violence and the site of politics.

The Westphalian system

One of the central charges of the great classical international relations theorists of the 20th century against their opponents in the interwar period was that their academic preoccupations overlooked the urgent realities of real politics, such as the rise of Nazism and the threat of Stalinist communism. Refining complex normative international institutions was all well and good, but in the meantime things were happening that did not fit those normative theories, and were urgent and dangerous. Realism accepts that urgency and keeps its eyes close to the foreground, largely ignoring what may be happening over the horizon. Those interested in international affairs are always preoccupied with a realistic perspective on what is happening in the world here and now. So it is not surprising that realism should claim to be the default position of international

relations. Yet, one of the perennial features of academic life, as opposed to political practice or journalism, is a concern with the underpinnings of an activity or a mode of experience. Perhaps in fields of the natural sciences (such as physics) this is not done by most physicists themselves but by mathematicians or philosophers. However, in all other subjects, scholars in general have views about those presuppositions and thus about how their practice should be conducted. Debates about methods of enquiry are a perennial subject of concern in history, literary studies, political science and international relations. Indeed, in political science, the preoccupation with the presuppositions of the activity and its object of enquiry is the professional terrain of political theorists, who (to the frustration of political scientists) are never satisfied with accounts of the object or method of their discipline. In the same way, within international relations, international theory is its own variant of that sub-discipline.

As international relations has come to distinguish itself within (or even outside) the rest of political science, the perspective of realism has come into its own as both a default theoretical position that scholars can defend or challenge, and also an account of the object of enquiry that international relations scholars can be expert in, as opposed to other aspects of political science generally conceived. These patterns explain the prevalence or hegemony of realism, but also the often-remarked fact that it is deeply contested as a single position (Bell 2009). Realism is always a construction, but some elements are commonly shared by the different 'realist' theorists. These elements are often grouped into the idea of the Westphalian system (Brown 2002), and include:

- a state-based system and the so-called 'domestic analogy';
- positivism and the rejection of normativity;
- the primacy of power politics; and
- conservativism with respect to international affairs, by which I mean a preference for the status quo over reform (rather than conservatism as an ideological position).

Each of these traits is an important target of criticism by IPT.

The Westphalian system and the 'domestic' analogy provide useful touchstones in international relations and political theory. For both, the 1648 Peace of Westphalia can conveniently be used to mark the beginning of the modern sovereign state and the consequent state system. Under the two treaties involved, a distinction is made between the idea of the state as responsible for internal political order within its territory and the subject of relations between state, assigned to the remit of diplomats and soldiers in practice or of international relations theorists in academic studies. The domestic analogy fits with the treaties' determination that the religion of a people within a particular state or territory was a strictly internal concern and not a matter for war or dispute between princes, an idea clearly echoed in the arguments of Thomas Hobbes. For later international relations theory this provided a foundational distinction

within the emerging discipline of political science between the study of politics within states and that between states. The domestic analogy had the effect of reinforcing a states-based view of politics and enshrining it within political science. Questions of constitutional design, voting systems, political rights and welfare provision were all considered domestic matters, to be explained by domestic forces within a political territory or tradition. What international relations theorists contributed was an understanding of a different set of questions that covered the relations between these internally self-sufficient domestic states. As international relations is concerned with a world of many states, it could not be reduced to a simple extension of national political interest, even in the case of the most powerful nation states.

The Westphalian analogy emerges whenever one thinks of domestic political agendas. Just as the 1648 Peace made the issue of whether a state was Catholic or Protestant a domestic matter, so in the modern world the question of whether a state is democratic or authoritarian is a domestic matter. For instance, it is not for a state to use political power beyond its borders so as to advance socialised health care, social democracy, or the removal or racial limitations of voting rights. But this ethos of self-limitation by states is only one part of the analogy. Underpinning the constraint on the ambition of politics that manifests itself in an ideology of states' rights, there is also the structural ordering of the international systems. The world is essentially a world of states, each with their own settled national interests, confronting an international domain of other states, each with their own national interests. Whilst Hobbes's idea of natural equality may not hold between these states, there is equally no natural and permanent hierarchy in international affairs. Nor are there any unambiguous sources of authority that have legitimate claim over the national interests of any state. Central to all conceptions of realism is the idea that the fundamental object of study is a world of states, and the forces or norms that govern their interaction in the absence of a natural or authoritative order. What kind of system emerges from this interaction is the subject matter of international relations. Debates within it are between different accounts of that order. Liberals see the mutual advantage of states leading to a broadly rules-based order that allows for the benefits of public goods and economic growth. So-called English School theorists explain how the international realm is a society but not a political order with a settled coercive power. Lastly, realists see the international order as a world of anarchy, contingency and power politics. For them, the international realm is best characterised in terms of conflict, the potential for war and the contingency of peace and order.

So, realists are suspicious of those who see order and rules emerging spontaneously out of interactions. Peace is the exception that needs explanation and conflict and war, or the permanent potential of such conflict, is the normal state of international affairs. The main arguments amongst realist thinkers are about whether this world of international anarchy is merely the result of historical

experience, or whether there is a causal story about the nature of conflict fol-lowing from states pursuing mutually conflicting interests without a tendency towards stable equilibrium. This explains the realists' claim to be focused on the facts of the matter, and not some ideal or utopian vision of how the world might be if certain conditions could be made to hold. This is connected to the second important feature of realism as an international relations theory.

Positivism is a methodological position that claims to focus solely on empiri-cal facts as the object of scientific enquiry, and to seek to understand the rela-tionships between those facts. Positivism in the social sciences aspires to the status of natural science with a stable object of enquiry that is independent of the values and aspirations of the enquirer. For a chemist, an element such as carbon is what it is, irrespective of the values, hopes and ambitions of the chemist. What a chemist analyses and the claims they make about the proper-ties of this element are unaffected by whether they personally are a Marxist–Leninist or a Catholic Royalist. The object of enquiry is indifferent to the val-ues of the enquirer, and how it behaves is fully conditioned or determined by causal laws and canons of scientific explanation. Of course, the real world of science is actually much more complex. Philosophers of science argue deeply about the nature of natural kinds, causal laws and the stability of the objects of scientific enquiry – think of the uncertainty principle in quantum mechanics. Yet, the aspiration to be a positive science, and to avoid collapsing all questions into questions about normative values, remains a central ambition of much social science.

Classical realists (such as E.H. Carr and Hans Morgenthau) had profound philosophical reasons behind their realism, which were linked to the ideas of Marx, Nietzsche and Weber and their critique of conventional moralism, rather than drawing on conceptions from the natural sciences. By contrast, neo-realists (such as Kenneth Waltz) have been far more interested in mod-elling international relations on a scientific methodology, one that privileges formal modelling and deductive inferences in theory development, rather than historical and empirical speculation. Carr and Morgenthau respond to Weber's post-Nietzschean idea of a disenchanted world that cuts them off from the pos-sibility of normative foundations, whereas Waltz's ambition is to provide robust explanatory claims that are empirically true irrespective of the claimer's values. Thus, a positivist stance can be a consequence of indifference to the claim of individual or collective values, in the same way that economics proceeds with-out reference to concepts like justice. Alternatively, as in the case of Carr and Morgenthau, positivism can be the tragic consequence of the retreat of values and the problem of nihilism. Whichever metaphysical foundation is chosen here, realism abandons an appeal to values in explaining international politics.

Accordingly, a realist account of the international system rejects the cred-ibility of questions about how international affairs *ought* to be conducted, and normative issues about how states *should* pursue their interests in competition

with other states. If there are laws in the international realm, these will be causal laws about empirics, describing the relationship between states pursuing their interests, or statistical correlations derived from the empirical data. They are not rules or principles that prescribe how states should behave and what should happen to them when they fail to live up to those rules. If in practice international affairs operate with some normative rules, or states choose to comply with sets of values, these are things that need to be explained in terms of some prior non-normative value. They are not pre-given principles that shape the claims of the primary actors in the international realm, namely states. Consequently, the realist is concerned with the prior question of why states might choose to comply with international laws that govern the conduct of war, rather than the moral question of whether and under what circumstances war is permissible. Foundational normativity does not exist. And non-foundational (caused) normativity needs to be explained in terms of some other non-normative property or factors. This methodological prioritisation of the positive over the normative, whatever its philosophical grounding, is responsible for the two remaining dimensions of the Westphalian system and realism: power politics and conservativism.

Power politics is a feature of realism because (in the absence of normativity or values being a source of motivation) the only reason for individual, group or state actions is the pursuit of interests or the satisfaction of desires. In the case of individual persons, the satisfaction of desires is the achievement of one's interests, because there has to a positive account of interests that is based on a natural property such as desire. Although states are different from persons, for realists they are similarly motivated by a natural property such as the aggregation of individual interests as the interest of the people, or the identification of the national interest with the interests of the ruling class or leadership. In each case, the motivation for action is again the satisfaction of desire or the pursuit of interest. Reason plays a role in satisfying one's desires or pursuing the national interest. But that role is purely a strategic calculation about how to best secure that interest, not in terms of deciding what that interest or desire should be. Consequently, whilst the chosen course of action can be rational or irrational, desires and interests are not.

The issue of power arises because states or rulers must pursue their national interest in a world where other states do likewise. In international affairs, there is no set of rules that naturally coordinates individual actions and interests (akin to a legal system that coordinates individual actions within a state). So each state is free to pursue its interest, as it sees fit, all of the time. Yet, without natural coordination we face a world of competition and potential conflict, with only our own power to fall back on to get other states to act within our interests, or to prevent them from acting contrary to our interests. Power in this case is the ability to get others to do what we want, and for the realist that is all there is to fall back on, in the case of international politics. Power can be seen to

have many dimensions, including the soft power of some states that cause others to want to imitate and align with them. But in the end power is that ability to get others to do what one wants or needs and, if that is not through dialogue, deliberation or imitation, then it can only be done through a threat of force. Realists tend to dismiss or overlook many of the subtle 'faces of power', in order to concentrate on its simplest and most striking forms such as military force and violence. This is partly a conceptual point, because, if the desire is to get others to do one's will, then force is a paradigm case of so doing. The concepts of power and force are therefore fundamental ones in realist theory.

However, the focus on power in realism is not merely an analytical and positivist point. The importance of power is not only conceptual but empirical. Much of history is the history of states going to war with other states to settle disputes or pursue interests that cannot be derived from persuasion, diplomacy or deceit. Realism has come to dominate international affairs, not just because of its theoretical parsimony and simplicity but because of its usefulness for policy science in international affairs such as security studies, diplomacy and strategy. Two of the most well-known realist thinkers in post-war United States international relations were George Kennan, who argued for containment of the USSR, and Henry Kissinger, who advocated that the U.S. use military force overtly and covertly alongside diplomacy to secure its interests as the guarantor of international order. Kissinger's reputation was as a modern 'Machiavellian', willing to deploy power in whatever way is necessary, the archetypal power politician, avoiding difficult questions about the morality of war, violence and conflict. By contrast, Kennan was a very different character. His strategy caused many political critics to argue that he was 'soft on Communism'. Kennan was undoubtedly a realist, but one who saw the strategy of diplomatic and military containment of Soviet and Marxism–Leninism expansion as a way of exercising power with the best likelihood of success. He regarded his more fiercely 'anti-Communist' critics as preoccupied with the pursuit of a perverse ideology, rather than recognising the claims of power and its strategic exercise.

Conservatism is the last dimension of realism. It follows from the state-based vision of international relations, denying any priority of normative values and principles, and the preoccupation with the effective manipulation of power. This conservatism is the most important trigger behind the growth of IPT as a critique of the hegemony of realist international relations. This is a small 'c' conservatism, not an ideological position – although it is sometimes associated with political conservatism, because big 'C' conservative parties in many democracies support the military, and during the Cold War were keen to confront their ideological enemies.

However, the main challenge of conservatism in realist international relations is that it tends to reflect the domestic analogy at the heart of the state system. International politics is always about a state pursuing its national (internally set) interest in the context of other states doing likewise. The resulting

division of labour between domestic and international politics means that many pressing issues that affect peoples are consigned to the domestic realm and most importantly to domestic resolution. The task of international relations is limited to securing the peaceful relations between states, and managing whatever international rules and institutions states have jointly created to serve their respective interests. The primary challenges of international politics are maintaining the international status quo from threats to stability as a result of changing balances of power and shifting alliances. At one level, this might seem a noble enough ambition given the costs of war and the breakdown of international order – a point that stands to the credit of realists such as Carr, Morgenthau, Niebuhr or Kennan. Yet, at the same time, this preference for the status quo has the effect of marginalising any new challenges, such as the provision of global public goods like dealing with the consequences of climate change. Equally, realism's preference for the status quo can become the basis for an ideological preference for asserting sovereignty over relying on mutually beneficial cooperation. This risks reifying what were only ever temporary and contingent features of (past) political experience.

This tendency to see international relations as a fixed set of technical problems thrown up by an international order with a particular (unchanging) character has made politicians and diplomats overly cautious in dealing with international problems that do not easily fit into this paradigm. This is especially the case when these problems are shaped by structural or external forces, or where the resolution of those problems is hampered by the preoccupation with the easy categorical distinction between the domestic and the international. Such issues as famines (in Bengal in 1943 and 1971, or the subsequent Bangladesh Famine of 1974) fell outside this distinction between the domestic and the international. Indeed, it was their salience that forced moral questions onto the agenda of international relations, and served as one of the main inspirations of IPT from the 1970s onwards. This convergence between a unique upsurge of interest in normative political theory and acute international problems transformed international relations as a subject and created one of its most vibrant and interesting sub-fields.

International political theory as critique

The convention of crediting John Rawls with rescuing political theory or philosophy from its near death at the hands of logical positivists and Oxford ordinary language philosophy goes back to Peter Laslett. It has come under considerable critical scrutiny in recent years by genealogies that have sought to question the hegemonic status of Rawlsian liberal-egalitarianism (Forrester 2019). It is certainly the case that plenty of important political theory was being done – although less so amongst analytical philosophers than the convention suggests. Yet, what is unquestionable is the explosion of interest in normative

questions that coincided with Rawls's publication of *A Theory of Justice* (Rawls 1971) and the subsequent debates it inspired. Political philosophy and theory was not only fashionable but also, it appeared, urgent. This was a period of extraordinary intellectual output that coincided with important and pressing issues in international politics. The background was the high point of the Cold War, with troubling confrontations across the 1970s and '80s. From the mid-1960s the U.S. as guarantor of the liberal democratic order was also mired in domestic civil rights disturbances and constitutional struggles and in an ill-fated war in Vietnam. The war tore apart American university campuses, not least because of the draft (compulsory U.S. military service selected by lot). Domestic issues in the United States always became international issues, because of its central place in international alliances and the domestic politics of all liberal democratic states. At first, the domain of the international itself came into play when assessing Rawls's claim to apply the concept of the social contract only to a 'closed domestic society' – which seemed to endorse one aspect of the state-centric approach of realism, albeit decisively abandoning its positivism.

Although Rawls wrote important essays on practical political issues such as civil disobedience, his primary work was his major grand theory of justice as fairness. The motivations behind this book are complex, but amongst them was a desire to provide an alternative to utilitarianism as the basis for public judgements of morality and justice, yet without relying also on an ethically realist account of natural law or natural rights. If there are to be person-protecting rights that limit the application of expedience or utility, then these need to be derived from a source of authority that all of us could reasonably accept, within a context of multiple ideas about the best form of life.

Rawls accepted the fact of pluralism (or reasonable disagreement) about what constitutes the good life and how one should live. But he nevertheless argued that we can arrive at principles of right (a basis for law and civil rights) that protect the fundamental dignity of free and equal persons. The theory is therefore critical of the prevailing technical policy language of utilitarianism, yet it also sought to provide a stable (liberal) basis for the intuitions that underpinned the widespread human belief in fundamental rights for each person to be treated as free and equal citizens. These intuitions were brought together and reconciled in a conception of political society as a fair scheme of social cooperation, that is, as a social contract shaped by two principles of justice. The first Rawlsian principle distributed a set of basic liberties to each, and the second ensured that any economic inequalities permitted were so structured as to benefit the worst off and to reflect fair equality of opportunity. Although Rawls is concerned with vindicating the claims of political philosophy and justifying normative principles, his argument was also seen as providing a justification for liberal political policies, of the sort that underpinned Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programme in the USA (1964–68), or the British welfare state according to writers like Anthony Crosland.

In this respect, Rawls's theory was contradicted by the libertarian theory of Robert Nozick in his 1974 book *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, which argued that positing any central distribution of goods that involved seizing from individuals the product of their own labour was inherently unjust. Nozick was also a significant philosopher seeking to test the limits of normative political theory (and not simply a libertarian ideologue). Within a short period, much of the Rawls versus Nozick debate involved taking sides in an ideological debate about redistribution within states, and consequently also between them. With the rise of the new right and the political success of Thatcher and Reagan in the early 1980s, political philosophy became more deeply politicised than had been expected. Political theorists continued to discuss Rawls versus Nozick debates in ever more technically sophisticated arguments about the metric of social justice.

Political theorists in political science departments no doubt place Rawls's *Theory of Justice* as the central text of the resurgence in normative theory. However, two other works also emphasised the extent to which that explosion of interest was always international and came to have a powerful influence on IPT. Peter Singer's (1972) essay 'Famine, Affluence and Morality' was published in the new journal *Philosophy and Public Affairs* in the wake of the Bengal Famine of 1971. And Michael Walzer's (1977) book *Just and Unjust Wars* (Walzer 1977) was a second path-breaking intervention in international affairs. It raised the prospect of justifying normative claims about the justice of war and the rights and wrongs of humanitarian intervention. Both interventions obviously challenge the normative silence and conservatism of realist international relations theory. Whilst some political philosophers became obsessed with the foundationalist debates about the possibility of grounding normative theories of justice, others with an interest in international affairs looked to these new theories to challenge policy and broaden the agenda of the study of international affairs beyond the relations of states and the distribution of power.

Singer was an uncompromising but sophisticated utilitarian philosopher who had made his name arguing for animal liberation. His essay on famine argued that individuals could be shown to have a duty to assist the poor and suffering by making personally insignificant spending choices so as to support famine relief charities that would collectively have significant impacts on overall global well-being. Singer showed that utilitarianism could be freed from the taint of being a technical 'Government House' morality and instead be a radical and transformative ethical theory for guiding personal actions that would fit with times. More importantly, Singer also offered an account of moral obligations that took *no* account of states, nations or peoples, by claiming that moral obligations are urgent, overriding and indifferent to the distribution of political sovereignty and responsibility. In one short essay, Singer rejected both the claims of states and the positivist denial of normativity. In response to his examples of famine relief, it was just implausible for realists to offer a

metaphysical account of why there could not be universal moral obligations to people confronting undeserved suffering. His issue-driven approach to moral and political philosophy was to be a major inspiration behind the movement towards 'applied ethics'.

For most of the 20th century, moral philosophy written in English focused on second-order ethical questions about the meaning and status of moral claims, especially in the light of logical positivism and ordinary language philosophy, which reduced normative claims to expressions of subjective preference or emotion. Philosophy, as a discipline, was considered to have very little to offer to substantive questions about how to live or what to do when faced with choices over valuable ends. Most philosophers were prepared to retreat to an analysis of the meaning of moral concepts and the conditions for their correct application. Singer's approach chimed with an age that was impatient with these technical and interminable disputes about emotivism, prescriptivism and descriptivism as accounts of the meaning of moral judgements, and instead wanted theorists to engage with the big issues of the day – such as the justice of war and military conscription, the regulation of private behaviour, or when it is legitimate to disobey the state or the law.

Although his argument is importantly different to Rawls's, Singer also draws on what he takes to be the widely shared intuition that individuals and their standing matter, at least when confronted with avoidable suffering. This approach is given a strikingly cosmopolitan direction in his 2002 book *One World: The Ethics of Globalisation*, where the ethical status of individuals and their well-being was taken to be definitive of the claims of intermediate institutions such as states. These only have moral standing in relation to individual interests and well-being (a direction that Rawls refuses to take; see Chapter 7). The new millennium began with a cosmopolitan optimism that soon gave way to more traditional concerns about states, war and conflict following 9/11 and the second Gulf War. Yet, this cosmopolitan optimism was not only challenged by a resurgent realism but was also confronted within IPT itself by the work of Michael Walzer, the third of our major sources of IPT.

Walzer had established his name with his *Just and Unjust Wars*, but he had also contributed to the methodological debates surrounding Rawls and his approach to political theory. Whereas Rawls and Nozick both began from a methodological individualism, Walzer returned to a different approach associated with Aristotle, Hegel and Marx that was to become known as communitarianism. His *Spheres of Justice* (1983) also defended a pluralist notion of 'complex equality' against Rawls's assumption that his 'primary social goods' could encompass all that mattered to peoples or groups. Communitarianism began as a critique of Rawls's methodology and for the best part of a decade the brightest and best minds struggled with the liberalism versus communitarian debate. Yet this superficially methodological debate disguised an underlying and important normative defence of political communities and associations, if

not states as such. Walzer, and those influenced by him, such as David Miller (Miller 1995), Yael Tamir (Tamir 1993) and Margaret Moore (Moore 2015), became associated with a resurgence of interest in ethical nationalism. Nations could be seen as ethical communities within which individual identities (conceptions of the self) emerged. So national communities are constitutive sources of value, and not just instrumental goods.

Nationalism studies, which had become theoretically marginalised inside sociology or history departments, now became a central problem for IPT, as the claims of nations gave rise to further debates about self-determination, secession, national preference and, most recently, the rights of migrants. Many of these debates exposed fundamental differences of value and philosophical method. Walzer is always careful to ground his ethical positions in historical experience and in terms of the moral realities that practitioners faced. In *Just and Unjust War* he seeks to understand the perspective of those engaged in the task of fighting wars and defending the interests of a people. So his primary concern is the way in which the war convention should be understood amongst military personal and citizens, rather than an ideal and abstract legalist perspective that sees all war as morally compromised and thus never just. His approach can be contrasted with individualist cosmopolitans, such as Cécile Fabre (Fabre 2012) or Jeff McMahan (2009), who address the challenge of war from the perspective of first principles, and who deny any moral status to political communities such as states.

IPT remains a vibrant field of enquiry. Much of the focus of recent work has concentrated on debates about membership and the relative claims of individuals and political associations, whether peoples, nations or states. To this extent, IPT has offered a robust critique of classical realism except for the most diehard positivists. It has also forced mainstream international relations theorists to raise their gaze from interstate politics to the challenges of global public goods and individual welfare and rights. Yet, IPT's success has not been left unquestioned. Some of the more radical and strident claims of global cosmopolitanism have contributed to a backlash within political theory against abandoning sensitivity to the claims of political virtue and obligation by reducing political theory just to applied ethics and questions of individual good. This backlash has been characterised as the 'realist turn' and introduces our second conception of realism: the one that is most appropriate to the narrative of this book.

The realist turn in political theory

The political theorists who have taken the 'realist turn' are aware that the concept of realism is both ambiguous in philosophy and conceptually loaded in IPT and international relations. The central idea of the turn is to assert the relative (or total) autonomy of politics in political theory. As 'political' political

theory is not ideal as the name for an approach or school, realism is the pre-
ferred option. As with all new movements in political theory or international
relations, much of the writing in this idiom concerns its distinction from other
forms. That said, a number of scholars have been concerned to show that this
approach is not just a methodological correction to the overambition of cos-
mopolitan individualism, but is also a perspective from which a different type
of normative theory can be conducted (Philp 2007; Sleat 2016). This idea of
realist political theory as a different way of doing normative political theory
was also the ambition of one of its most important theorists, Bernard Wil-
liams, although he did not live to deliver fully on that ambition (Williams 2005;
Hall 2020).

   Williams's most famous insight is to distinguish political realism from moral-
ism and to assert the priority of the 'first political question' as the basic legiti-
mation demand. Moralist approaches to political theory can take two forms.
The *enactment model* is exemplified by the applied ethics approach of Singer,
where political prescriptions are derived from pre-political ideals, such as uni-
versal welfare, equality or autonomy. This form of political theory is the found-
ing ambition of journals such as *Philosophy and Public Affairs* addressing policy
and politics with the best outcomes of moral philosophy. The *structural model*
alludes to the kind of grand theorising favoured by Rawls and his liberal-egali-
tarian followers. In this instance, permissible political conduct is limited by the
prior demands of a theory of justice, an account of autonomy or a set of pre-
political rights. In both cases, the challenge is the priority of moralism, that is,
the subordination of politics to ethics and morality. This accusation may seem
to echo the argument against the attempted subordination of idealism to the
reality of power politics that is familiar from Carr or Morgenthau. Yet, Williams
does not deny the possibility of normative political theory in favour of positiv-
ism or amoral scepticism, whatever some of his philosopher colleagues may
have thought. His primary concern is to distinguish genuine political claims
from ethical or moral claims, and to show that political life can create obliga-
tions and reasons that are prior to moral judgements and reasons. Characteris-
ing the domain of the political was an ambition that he did not live to deliver
upon. But asserting the priority of the 'first political question' was a preoccupa-
tion of his later years and led to his most important writings on political the-
ory, which defend the claim of legitimation over moral justification. The first
question of politics concerns the legitimacy of political authority, or why we
should recognise the claims of political authority. This question is prior to the
moral question of political obligation – 'Why obey the state?' – because it can
be given a number of answers that are not necessarily moral. More importantly,
it requires an answer before one can ask moral questions of political authority,
such as the justice of its distributions and use. To subject political institutions
and relationships to the priority of morality has the paradoxical consequence
of leaving all existing political societies illegitimate. If political obligation or
legitimate submission is only appropriate to just institutions, then there are

no genuine political societies, a point acknowledged in very different ways by Augustine and John Locke (see Chapters 3 and 6). If we do recognise the claims of the political in real life, and Williams suggests we do most of the time, then they cannot depend on the priority of answering a moral question about justice or right: that way lies anarchy. Williams makes much of this question of theoretical priority, partly because of his scepticism about the two dominant ethical positions in contemporary moral theory (utilitarianism and Kantianism).

Other thinkers weave different strands of argument into the question of the priority of the political. For many critics, the lack of historical awareness in contemporary political philosophy is itself a fundamental problem. The idea that a perennial philosophical question about justice could be finally settled is itself problematic for many theorists. Does Rawls's theory really settle the question of justice once and for all? Forever could be a very long time. Contextualist theories, such as Walzer's communitarianism, are much more sensitive to the claims of history. They acknowledge that moral questions of justice, right and equality must be given answers that are sensitive to the historical conditions in which they are asked. Although he is not a realist in any straightforward sense, Walzer's work (and that of many influenced by him) does contribute to the 'realist turn', at least by raising the problem of historical contingency or even relativism in respect of fundamental moral and political values.

This historical challenge to the possibility and desirability of a final answer to the problem of justice finds one of its most strident defences in the work of Raymond Geuss. Although Geuss acknowledges some debt to Williams, his dismissal of the claims of morality over politics has more to do with Marx and Nietzsche. Geuss is a relentless critic of the attempt to build politics on the ethics of Immanuel Kant, as he claims (with some justification) that Rawls seeks to do. But, for Geuss, Kant is not the highest expression of Enlightenment morality; he is merely a late Prussian thinker, obsessed with trying to salvage an unattractive variant of Christian piety. Following Nietzsche, one of Geuss's heroes, he argues that moral philosophies are simply the dead politics of the past exercising a kind of tyranny over us, in the way that in Nietzsche's view the weak use morality to dominate the strong (Rossi and Sleat 2014, p. 692). For Geuss, morality and ethics are no better than an historically contingent ideology that has its own history and power relations that serve some interest. His hostility to Rawls (and the tradition of theory that he began) is that this is just one further manifestation of bourgeois class morality. But, if all is politics, then morality can give it no advice. Whatever normative component there is for political theory to provide has to be found within political activity itself. Geuss gives the imperialist ambition of liberal-egalitarian philosophy its most brutal kicking.

There is another important strand of criticism offered by those who do not accept Geuss's Nietzscheanism, and that is the challenge of multiple value systems coexisting. This problem of value pluralism is not new in contemporary political philosophy. It was the central preoccupation of Isaiah Berlin, who had an influence on Rawls's philosophical formation (Berlin 1998). Berlin was not a

relativist, nor was he a moral sceptic like Geuss, but he was a staunch defender of the view that moral values and systems were plural: this is true whether we are discussing individual values (such as liberty, equality and solidarity), or moral systems (such as liberalism, nationalism or Christianity) (Hall 2020). Values may be combined in different ways, but they cannot be reduced to a simple unity without some remainder, or having to make tragic choices. Similarly, different value systems may partially overlap, but they too are never completely commensurable. For value pluralists, political choice and disagreement are inevitable consequences of modern and diverse societies. Yet, even within non-pluralist societies (such as revolutionary Iran), Berlin would argue that there is still the problem of pluralism between theological liberals and hard-liners. Pluralism is an ineradicable feature of moral experience. But, if pluralism is the reality of moral experience, it cannot then be appealed to to settle political disputes between different values and principles.

The challenge facing the liberalism of Rawls and his followers is to ground a fair scheme of social cooperation that can establish principles for governing this empirically evident pluralism, or what Rawls call the fact of reasonable disagreement. The point of the liberal turn to social justice is to establish claims of right (or justice) that can reconcile the different conceptions of the good (or conceptions of value and the good life) of free and equal individuals. Yet, the problem with this approach, for realists, is that it assumes that a rational consensus can be provided for those principles of right, when that is precisely what the value pluralist claim denies is possible. Can one make a categorical distinction between the right and the good that does not beg the question? The theory of justice helps itself to precisely that consensus when it claims it is possible in order to justify the priority of social justice over a politically imposed conception of the common good. Indeed, Geuss's point is that liberal egalitarians just pick their preferred settlement and impose it on everyone else. However, William Galston argues that the fact of pluralism does not have to involve the claims that there can be no normative consensus, although he does argue that this will not be permanent and final as a conception of justice claims. It will emerge from a political process and draw on the values internal to that process, such as the constitutional culture of a particular society (Galston 2002). Realist political theory is much closer to the actual politics of really existing societies and far less ambitious or utopian than much of the normative political theory published over the last five decades.

Legitimacy, violence and the site of politics

The 'realist turn' in contemporary political theory provides an important corrective to the ambitions of individualist cosmopolitanism to reduce all political questions to moral or ethical questions, leaving political theory only the technical task of delivering on the answers. And, whilst it is undoubtedly connected

to some of the deflationary claims of the great 20th-century classical realists (such as Carr, Morgenthau and Niebuhr), realist political philosophy does not abandon normative theorising altogether in favour of positivism. Indeed, many such as Matt Sleat (2016) and Edward Hall (2020) argue that the influence of Williams provides a useful redirection for normative political theory rather than a retreat into the history of ideas or methodological criticism. There is no reason for political theory of a realist orientation to fall victim to Procrustean positivism, or to conservativism – although these authors also make space for a genuinely conservative approach to political thinking that has not been seen since the work of Michael Oakeshott in the 1950s (Oakeshott 1962). In the field of the history of political thought, this 'realist turn' is also valuable in opening up new discussions of major past thinkers who do not fall within the parameters of the 'rise of the modern state' or the debate between 'cosmopolitans and communitarians' about the theoretical starting point for normative theory.

However, there are also two dimensions of traditional IR realism and of the new realist political theory that this book challenges or seeks to expand on. The first is the state-based focus of politics and the second is the place of violence. For the first issue here, many histories of political thought and of IPT address the rise and rationale of the modern state system and the relations that exist between those states. These histories can be teleological, addressing the emergence of the state system as a consequence of an historical process such as historical materialism, as we find in Carr. Alternatively, moralist theories could explain the growth of this system as the development of the idea of natural law and natural rights, and of the institutions necessary to realise and sustain them. One of the reasons for insisting that this book is not a simple history of realist international theory is my strong desire to challenge that kind of teleological history, when applied to the institutions of the state system or to the ideological and philosophical justifications of it. Yet, the new 'realist turn' in political theory also has a tendency to assume the primacy of the state as the vehicle through which political questions arise, or to take them for granted in ways that overlook the contingency of the form of modern politics. At its worst, this can result in an unquestioning acceptance of conceptions of the domain of the political that are either conservative in their endorsement of the status quo or utopian in their sympathy for a correct type of political institution – republicanism. This challenge is nicely captured in a quotation from Matt Sleat:

> One of the central truths of politics is that there is a difference between the ability to rule and the right to do so, that might does not equal right and that politics is not the same as successful domination. Any claim to be ruling politically will need to make some appeal to principled grounds on which such rule is exercised – principles that should be intelligible to both the rulers and the ruled such that it can be recognised as a form of politics rather than sheer domination. (Sleat 2016, p. 32)

Implicit in this view is a conception of the people that remains sufficiently stable and coherent for it to have a 'politics', whilst also being sufficiently pluralist for the 'consensus' view of political legitimation to not hold. Perhaps the argument is that the emergence of political communities is an historically contingent matter, and so not one for political theory. Indeed, one of the reasons for privileging the 'first political question' of the legitimation of power over the moral question of justice is precisely that the question only arises in the face of an entity within which politics can emerge. Yet, one of the reasons for turning to international theory is to see the variety of sites where politics can arise, and how even in the modern world it is not obvious that that question arises only (or even mostly) with states. IPT, when viewed over a long period of time, illustrates the different forms (which I have called paradigms) in which politics can manifest itself, and consequently how that process of legitimation also varies.

The second issue concerns the primacy of legitimation, and the place of violence within it. Violence has been a constant companion of each of the thinkers discussed in this book. In some cases, it was the threat that was constantly below the surface (as in Thucydides) or a perennial feature of the fallen world (Augustine and Schmitt). Violence can also be the problem that the sovereign state exists to discipline and constrain (Hobbes and Clausewitz) or something that the state unleashes (Locke, Rousseau and Clausewitz). But violence can also be part of the process of legitimation itself (as in Machiavelli, Lenin and Mao, and Schmitt). In this respect the perspective of IPT is more useful for broadening the scope of a new political theory than a conception of political theory that assumes stable political entities, whether states or republics.

Sleat is right to draw a conceptual distinction between the power to rule and the right to rule: a punch in the face might give one 'a reason' but not the right kind of reason in seeking to answer the basic legitimation demand. The ability to deploy violence and force is not itself a legitimating reason without further explanation. But that does not mean we must follow Hannah Arendt's rejection of all violence and force, and so see politics and its legitimating strategies solely in discursive terms (Arendt 2005). Hobbes's account of sovereignty by acquisition does seem to suggest that force and its threat are a legitimate reason if a reason is a simple cause of action, but this is not the only way in which violence works in the process of legitimation. Machiavelli's *The Prince* offers a different way in which violence and force can provide a legitimating reason of the relevant sort that is not reducible to a calculation of interest: it can 'satisfy and amaze', as did the violence against Remirro de Orco's body. To claim that this sort of action cannot legitimate political authority involves an implicit moral claim that violence is unacceptable, and that can only depend on a moral judgement and not a conceptual distinction.

The important point about Machiavelli's discussion (and those of Lenin, Mao and Schmitt) is that all of them challenges the sufficiency of discourse or argument in the process of legitimating power. What Machiavelli shows is that how

legitimation works and to whom it is directed cannot be settled so easily. And if we turn from Machiavelli's *The Prince* to his republican theory, we can see that the simple contrast between the ideal of republicanism and the immanent violence of the modern nation state is also far from uncontroversial. History shows that politics is not only set in a context where violence was more prevalent than it has become in the modern state, but that it is often an integral part of how political legitimacy is conceived.

Conclusion

This book is a textbook designed to introduce and raise issues that are addressed in detail in other places, as opposed to a narrow research monograph that raises and answers a single question or set of questions from the scholarship. So this concluding essay cannot answer all of the complex issues that emerge from the challenges of IPT to the hegemony of realism. Nor can it resolve the realist political theory challenge to the unreality and unpolitical direction of much contemporary political philosophy, especially in its cosmopolitan form that rejects any ethically significant entity beyond the human individual. IPT has been liberated from a narrow statist politics by its engagement with the explosion of normative political theory from the mid-1960s onwards. Yet, it has also lost sight of the importance of politics and the ambiguity surrounding the nature of that activity.

In setting out a canon of thinkers that can contribute to contextualising modern debates in IPT, I hope to have provided a resource for that specific subdiscipline and for realist political theory more broadly by bringing questions about the nature of the political (the place where political relationships arise, as well as the nature of those relationships) to the foreground. This contribution contrasts particularly with many western histories of political thought that tend towards identifying the progress of history towards the free and equal subject, liberated in a cosmopolitan global order and freed from the tyranny of arbitrary institutions such as states – accounts that place liberal democracy as the end of history and the last human.

I also hope to have challenged the horizon of realist political theory with its preoccupation with the fact of disagreement amongst a people. The perspective of the international as a starting point is valuable because it begins with the question 'amongst whom do the problems of politics arise?' rather than simply treating the international realm as the last part of a state theory. In so doing, it opens a challenge to some aspects of the 'new realist' political theory, with its rejection of violence in accounts of legitimacy (Sleat 2016; Hall 2020). The place of violence in politics and its consistency with an understanding of what are genuinely political relationships are challenges posed to all political theory by Hannah Arendt. Arendt has not featured in my story with a distinct chapter, but in many respects her challenge and that of another great but non-canonical thinker Frantz Fanon (Fanon 2001) have haunted all of the

discussions throughout this book. I will not make the grand claim that the ubiquity of violence is the fundamental problem facing IPT. But I will conclude with the Augustinian insight that violence remains an ineradicable feature of human experience whatever other more benign and favourable goods political life and international politics may bring. Therefore, it should not be denied.

Bibliography

Arendt, Hannah. (2005). *The Promise of Politics*. USA: Schocken.

Bell, Duncan. (2009). 'Introduction: Under an Empty Sky – Realism and Political Theory', in D. Bell (ed.) *Political Thought and International Relations: Variations on a Realist Theme*. UK: Oxford University Press, pp. 1–25.

Berlin, Isaiah. (1998). *The Proper Study of Mankind*. UK: Pimlico.

Brown, Chris. (2002). *Sovereignty, Rights and Justice: International Political Theory Today*. UK: Polity Press.

Bull, Hedley. (2002). *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, 3rd edn. UK: Palgrave.

Fabre, Cécile. (2012). *Cosmopolitan War*. UK: Oxford University Press.

Fanon, Franz. (2001). *The Wretched of the Earth*. UK: Penguin.

Forrester, Katerina. (2019). *In the Shadow of Justice: Postwar Liberalism and the Remaking of Political Philosophy*. USA: Princeton University Press.

Galston, William. (2002). *Liberal Pluralism: The Implications for Value Pluralism for Political Theory*. UK: Cambridge University Press.

Geuss, Raymond. (2005). *Outside Ethics*. USA: Princeton University Press.

Hall, Edward. (2020). *Value, Conflict and Order: Berlin, Hampshire, Williams, and the Realist Revival in Political Theory*. USA: University of Chicago Press.

McMahan, Jeff. (2009). *Killing in War*. UK: Clarendon Press.

Miller, David. (1995). *National Identity*. UK: Oxford University Press.

Moore, Margaret. (2015). *The Political Theory of Territory*. UK: Oxford University Press.

Nozick, Robert. (1974). *Anarchy, State and Utopia*. UK: Basil Blackwell.

Oakeshott, Michael. (1962). *Rationalism in Politics*. UK: Methuen.

Owens, Patricia. (2009). 'The Ethic of Reality in Hannah Arendt', in Duncan Bell, *Political Thought and International Relations: Variations on a Realist Theme*. UK: Oxford University Press, pp. 105–121.

Philp, Mark. (2007). *Political Conduct*. UK: Harvard.

Rawls, John. [1971] (1999). *A Theory of Justice*. UK: Harvard Belknap Press.

Rossi, Enzo; and Sleat. Matthew. (2014). 'Realism in Normative Political Theory' *Philosophy Compass*, vol. 10, pp. 689–701.

Singer, Peter. (1972). 'Famine, Affluence and Morality' *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 1, no. 3, pp. 229–243.

Singer, Peter. (2002). *One World: The Ethics of Globalisation*. USA: Yale University Press.

Sleat, Matt. (2013). *Liberal Realism: A Realist Theory of Liberal Politics*. UK: University of Manchester Press.

Sleat, Matt. (2016). 'Realism, Liberalism and Non-Ideal Theory Or, Are there Two Ways to do Realistic Political Theory?' *Political Studies*, vol. 64, pp. 27–41.

Tamir, Yael. (1993). *Liberal Nationalism*. USA: Princeton University Press.

Walzer, Michael. (1977). *Just and Unjust Wars*. USA: Basic Books.

Wight, Martin. (1991). *International Theory: The Three Traditions*, ed. Gabriele Wight and Brian Ernest Porter. UK: Leicester University Press.

Williams, Bernard. (2005). *In the Beginning was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*, ed. Geoffrey Hawthorne. UK: Cambridge University Press.