# The emergence of ‘realism’ in political theory has the potential to change how we think about the real world of politics.

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*What should political theory aim to achieve?* **Mark Philp** *writes on the emergence of ‘realism’ in political theory and philosophy. While political philosophy has often been dominated by abstract normative debates of the kind epitomised by John Rawls, realism is based on the principle of determining how we should act in less than ideal circumstances. Outlining the main features of political realism, he notes that its growing prominence in debates partly reflects frustration with the intellectually indulgent approach of some political philosophers.*

Political theorists talk about justice and equality, liberty and democracy, revolution, alienation, liberation, and a lot more besides. Their expertise lies in being able to disagree with each other in great detail on a series of topics that are fundamental to politics and society world-wide. Although the terms political philosophy and political theory are used rather indiscriminately, those who think of themselves as political philosophers tend to link what they do closely to philosophical and moral principles; while those who call themselves political theorists tend to appeal to facts about the world and to the way in which the structures and processes of social and political life limit the possibilities for the realisation of those principles by political agency.

Political philosophy has been dominated, since 1970, by the work of John Rawls, and by those who have criticised him – Robert Nozick, Michael Sandel, Michael Walzer, Ronald Dworkin, Jerry Cohen, Amartya Sen, to name only a few. These exchanges have led to an increasingly rich terrain of debate about justice and equality in particular – as in discussions of what it is we should be trying to equalise when we promote equality: should it be equal levels of welfare, equal resources, equality of access to resources, and so on.

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More recently, however, there has been a groundswell of political theorists who have rejected this abstract political thinking as ‘ideal-theory’ and who want political theory to address real world considerations of how to act in less than ideal circumstances, thereby demanding ‘non-ideal theory.’ At the same time, a movement for ‘political realism’ has also emerged. The boundaries between non-ideal theory and realism are porous and blurred. Non-ideal theorists often draw on Rawls’s own work to distinguish between ideal questions and cases where we cannot make idealising assumptions about the motives of those engaged in the search for principles of justice. Realists, in contrast, for the most part believe that there needs to be a fundamental re-focus of attention to the exigencies and practicalities of politics itself.

One ground for this refocusing is Bernard Williams’ critique of approaches that put moral and political philosophy first and that see the task of politics as meeting objectives that are established in advance by philosophy – a view in which the content of political theory is essentially set by prior moral concerns. In contrast, realism expresses scepticism about, firstly, the possibility of establishing ideals that are

uncontentious and that can ground a consensus in politics. Second, it questions whether abstract standards can be action-guiding in the real world – given the multi-dimensionality of the issues it becomes unclear how any one sub-optimal choice can claim superiority over any other sub-optimal choice. Third it questions the capacity of philosophical approaches to acknowledge that judgments and decisions are made right, not by conforming to an abstract principle, but by being made, committed to, and seen through in the imperfect world in which we live ( a view known as 'decisionism' and linked to the work of Max Weber).

Realism in political theory purports to be more centrally concerned with what should be done – now, with the complex of compromising choices that have to be faced in the real world, fully appreciating the dynamics of power and the necessity for compromise on objectives and interests. And in approaching that question realism rejects the view that we can somehow get the values straight first and then simply apply them in the real world.

Four features of political realism should be emphasised. First, realism involves a genuine turn to politics, in all its messy and unsavoury detail. It is in practice, in political judgment, through struggle and negotiation, that politics is able to identify and realise values. For realists, political theorists should be studying and thinking about that process if they are to do justice to their claim to be 'political' theorists. Second, realism also involves a turn to the analysis of power and the more empirically informed study of institutions and practices and their dynamics, in order to grasp – following Lenin – 'what is to be done.'

Third, although there are versions of political realism associated with agonism and with post-Marxist critical theory, realist approaches share a reluctance to commit to any prior account of what makes politics necessary and what kinds of goods or values it can realise. Agonists tend to emphasise the irreducibility of struggle in the political domain, but see politics as a way of holding a line in that struggle, between agonism and antagonism or outright conflict. Post-Marxist critical theory focuses especially on the articulation of voices and interests that existing political arrangements exclude or marginalise, as a form of emancipation from oppression. Alternatively, many realists see politics as necessary for the authoritative resolution of conflict, the ordering of competing interests in ways that can command some degree of legitimacy, or the provision of a basic level of security for citizens. But in each case, these injunctions and objectives are deduced not from philosophical principle, but from an understanding of the distinctive character of politics as a form of order and authority, contending with a world in which conflict is a fact of life.

Last, although political realism has become a major strand in contemporary political theory it should also be acknowledged that a great deal that is written in its support is itself very philosophical, and not very practical. That is partly because political theorists are often not well equipped to do detailed work on what in any particular situation is within the bounds of political possibility – and partly because this calls for specific proposals, and that demand runs against political theory's tendency towards abstraction and generalisation. While political theory may be uniquely equipped to critique the abstract moralising of philosophy and its application to politics, it is less able to deliver concrete alternatives, since dong so calls for knowledge and skills that are more likely found in the government and public policy sectors of politics departments.

Realism is not new in politics. In international relations it has been a persistent option – although even its most powerful advocates, such as Hans Morgenthau and E.H. Carr both saw the need to balance realism with more normative 'moments'. Its prominence now is partly a function of people's frustration with the dominance of a certain style of Anglo-American analytical political philosophy, and the sense that this encourages a kind of intellectual indulgence that cuts us off from the real – and both dangerous and massively important – world of politics that we should want to be able to understand and shape. But in this too, one must be realistic.

*For further reading on political realism see:* William Galston, 'Realism in Political Theory' European Journal of Political Theory, 9 (4), 2010; Mark Philp, 'Realism without Illusions' Political Theory, 2012; Raymond Geuss, Philosophy and Real Politics (Princeton UP, 2009); Mark Philp, Political Conduct (Harvard UP, 2007); and Bernard Williams, In the Beginning was the Deed (Cambridge UP, 2005).

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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