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Article:
Edyvane, D orcid.org/0000-0003-2169-4171 (2020) Who's the realest? European Journal of Political Theory, 19 (2). pp. 281-290. ISSN 1474-8851

https://doi.org/10.1177/1474885119864679

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Who's the Realest?

Matt Sleat (ed.), *Politics Recovered: Realist Thought in Theory and Practice*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.

'This be the realest shit you heard in your life'

- 'The Realest' Mobb Deep (feat. Kool G Rap)

The tail-end of hip hop's 'golden age' in the early 1990s saw an explosion of interest in the 'real'. A growing independent label scene and a consequent lowering of barriers to entry combined with rising audience appetite led to the emergence of artists eager to assert the authenticity of their ghetto background and experience. Unlike the 'fake' rappers' tall tales of a street life they had never actually lived, these artists would tell it as it *really* was. Or so they claimed (repeatedly).

Politics Recovered, a new collection of essays edited by Matt Sleat, opens not with reminiscences of golden age hip hop, but instead with a discussion between Callicles and Socrates in the *Gorgias* in which Callicles rails against philosophers like Socrates 'without experience of the laws of the city, of the language required in dealings with people, whether public or private, of human pleasures and desires – in fact, altogether ignorant of the ways of the world' (as quoted, p.1). From ancient Athens to Queensbridge, New York today, the allure of the real is ubiquitous and enduring. There is a profound attraction in the idea that, without anyone really noticing, all that has come before has been somehow artificial. And there is something quietly thrilling in the promise of a more realistic alternative.

Recent years have seen a renewal of interest in realism in political theory and a burgeoning literature devoted to the theme. *Politics Recovered* is a major contribution to that literature and will be of keen interest to all those engaging with questions of realism in political thought. Comprising fourteen original essays from leading scholars, the collection seeks to do something rather distinctive. It is not an attempt to formulate a realist manifesto, but something more akin to a dialogue that takes in dissenting voices as well

as supporters and which takes seriously the question (so far widely neglected) of what the realist orientation might actually look like in application. The collection also takes more seriously than has usually been the case the connections between contemporary political realism and the classical tradition of realism in international relations. All in all, this makes for a wide-ranging and highly engaging book. But it is also a book that in my view highlights as never before the deficiencies of the realist vogue. I shall try, in the first section of this article, to explain why that is, though my intention is not purely destructive. In the second section I will try to indicate what I take to be of central value in the realism debate and, in so doing, raise a question about the role of the political theorist that I think has been problematically bypassed in some of the recent realist literature.

1. The Vacuity of Realism

Attempts to identify *the* realist approach are destined to fail, for as Sleat suggests, it is 'wrong to think that there is one realism, even as an approach to thinking about politics' (p. 12). Instead, we do better to characterise political realism as a 'family of theories' (p. 8) united by what Sleat describes as a commitment to a kind of 'truthfulness or fidelity' in relation to its political subject matter (p.2). The realist family thus embraces disagreement among its members about 'what politics is "really like"' and also about how to respond 'appropriately' to the realities of politics (p. 2), but it is united by their conviction that those questions must be central to any serious form of political thought. While that seems a reasonable characterisation, I think it neglects a deeper kind of disagreement which threatens to obliterate altogether the realist family resemblance. The difficulty here is not just a matter of disagreement about the nature of politics and how best to respond to it, but a deeper metaphysical disagreement about what is real in the first place.

The disagreement I have in mind is illustrated nicely in the outlooks of two of the central characters in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Dorian Gray is (among other things) a realist, and in a fairly straightforward sense. Inspired by Lord Henry's insistence that it is 'only shallow people who do not judge by appearances' (Wilde, 2008: ch. 2), Dorian Gray demands that we take very seriously the surface appearances of everyday life. In his view, we must concentrate our attention on the reality disclosed to us

by our senses. '[N]o theory of life seemed to him to be of any importance compared with life itself. He felt keenly conscious of how barren all intellectual speculation is when separated from action and experiment. He knew that the senses, no less than the soul, have their spiritual mysteries to reveal' (Wilde, 2008: ch. 11). Serious intellectual thought must on this view begin from the reality by which it is directly confronted. But Dorian Gray is not the only realist in Wilde's tale. His love interest, the actress Sibyl Vane, is a realist, too, but a realist of a wholly different stripe. She explains in the novel how she lost her will to act upon coming to see the whole enterprise as a distortion of reality: 'The painted scenes were my world. I knew nothing but shadows, and I thought them real. You came – oh, my beautiful love! – and you freed my soul from prison. You taught me what reality really is. To-night, for the first time in my life, I saw through the hollowness, the sham, the silliness of the empty pageant in which I had always played' (Wilde, 2008: ch. 7). So, Sibyl Vane also stresses the importance of attending to what is really real. But in her view reality is not disclosed to us by our senses; it resides instead beneath the masks we wear, and the 'empty pageant' in which we play. Of course, Dorian is repulsed by her words, for in his view it is 'simply expression … that gives reality to things' (Wilde, 2008: ch. 9).

In Dorian Gray and Sibyl Vane we thus find the representatives of two radically different conceptions of reality. For the Dorian Gray-style realist, reality is to be found on the surface of human life and affairs, among the direct objects of perception. For the Sibyl Vane-style realist, by contrast, the direct objects of perception are a fraudulent sham. They are nothing but shadows of the reality, which is in fact to be found beneath or behind the surface. We may accordingly identify two corresponding interpretations of the realities of politics. Either the political reality consists in the surface appearance of public life – for example, in the directly perceptible institutions of government and performances of political actors; or it resides beneath the surface – perhaps in the hidden mechanisms of power and in the minds of political actors. This simple distinction between surface and depth, a notorious distinction in the history of philosophy, forces a question that I do not think has been taken sufficiently seriously in the contemporary debate about political realism. Where exactly ought we to seek the 'realities of politics': on or beneath the surface?

Elizabeth Frazer is one of very few commentators on the realism debate to have asked genuinely searching questions about the metaphysical status of the reality to which so-called realists claim fidelity (p. 326; see also Frazer, 2010). But as soon as one begins to press those questions the unity of the realist 'family' quickly unravels. Sleat's claim that 'the one thing that unites realistic theories … is the sense that the reality of politics ought to play some significant role in directing the theorist's activity' (p.8) is simply vacuous. Plato thought that the reality of politics – to be found not in the shadows of the cave, but behind the veil of experience in the light of the sun – ought to play some significant role in directing the theorist's activity, so should we then conclude that Plato was a realist? And, if Plato gets in, then presumably John Rawls gets in. And, if Rawls gets in, then the claim to a distinctively 'realist' orientation in contemporary political theory crumbles. If there is a realist family, then it has more than its share of black sheep and bastards.

The ambiguity of the vocabulary of realism creates a curious tendency that plays out across the pages of the collection, as contributors assert their realist credentials in the manner of golden age rap stars. First, John Medearis (in a fascinating discussion of democratic theory) challenges the claim to realism asserted by Walter Lippman. He claimed to be real, but he wasn't really real. Lippman's critique of 'unrealistic' accounts of the ideal democratic citizen and his preferred, dismal view of the citizen depended crucially on unrealistic premises – on both 'an epistemological ideal of unobstructed access to facts and a democratic ideal holding that citizens may achieve such a privileged perspective' (p. 159). Rather delightfully, Richard Bellamy has a name for this sort of thing, challenging the 'pseudorealism' of neo-Machiavellians who interpret Machiavellian realism as entailing the rejection of democracy and democratic leadership whilst all the time clinging to various unrealistic ideals (ch. 7). In an intriguing twist, Alison McQueen and William E. Scheuerman both suggest that the contemporary realists are not as realistic as they think they are and can learn a thing or two about reality from the 'old school' classical IR realists (ch. 10; ch. 11). And the collection ends with a 'reality check' from Michael Freeden, who seeks to discredit every variant of realism as 'unadventurous, lacking or uninformed' (p. 344). He claims that they all 'fall short of addressing the actual and ascertainable features of the political' as a way of clearing the

ground for his own brand of 'realer political realism' (p. 344). Given the metaphysical obscurity of reality, it can be hard to know what the point of all of this is supposed to be.

This is not at all to say that there is nothing of substance in these discussions, just that the language of 'realism' is an entirely unhelpful way of framing things. It might be objected that this is really just a terminological quibble: the realists have been clear enough about what they take reality to be, and Plato is no realist by that account. But I think the problem does run a bit deeper than that. This is partly because I am not convinced the realists agree with each other about what (or where) reality is – in particular, my impression is that Raymond Geuss and his followers think of reality rather differently from the rest. But it is also because the thrill of the real, which I noted at the outset, means that any appeal to realism does ideological work that distorts the enterprise of political theory in potentially damaging ways.

Several of the contributors to the collection note the way in which contemporary realism depends on a highly contestable (in my view *essentially* contestable) account of reality. The 'real' world of the realists is a bleak and brutal world (p. 349) bereft of the 'angelic individuals' of ideal theory (p. 174) and populated mostly by 'weak, easily distracted, deeply conflicted and confused' human agents (Geuss as quoted by McQueen, p. 257) in thrall to the 'darker passions' of anger and humiliation (ch. 4), and locked in perpetual conflict about justice (passim). As McQueen notes, rarely is any evidence offered in support of these claims (and, as I have implied, it is not clear anyway what would even count as 'evidence' in this context) giving them instead 'the air of timeworn ritual utterances': 'Such "facts" are made to bear a heavy burden in the realist's attempt to explain why the moralist's political and institutional principles translate so poorly into effective political proposals' (p. 257). Yet we are given little reason to believe in them beyond the blank assertion that this is the reality before us.

What do we lose by simply dropping the language of 'realism' and political 'reality'? Very little it seems to me that is worth keeping. We lose, I suppose, the cottage industry that has built up around realism in recent years, but which is anyway descending by now into navel-gazing irrelevance. And perhaps we lose the point of *Politics Recovered*. The unifying thread of the book seems to be the conviction that reality

matters, but, for the reasons I have given, I think we would be hard pressed to find a theorist who thinks it doesn't. We keep, I suggest, a powerful style of political thought quite distinct from the mainstream mode of anglophone analytical political philosophy, the power of which depends not at all on the degree of its proximity to 'reality'. It is to that style of thought I now turn.

2. Bernard Williams and The Role of Theory

Nothing I have said so far is meant to suggest that there is no value in the so-called political realist orientation. That could scarcely be the case given the ability of the authors working in this area. In particular, while I dissent from the language of realism he chose to employ, I am persuaded that Bernard Williams's late, posthumously published, work in political theory identifies a genuinely novel and distinctive mode of political thought.

In contrast to the prevailing tendency of political theory to 'claim the priority of the moral over the political' (Williams, 2005: 8), Williams sought to articulate an approach that gives 'greater autonomy to distinctively political thought' (2005: 3). He labelled the former 'political moralism' and the latter 'political realism'. A major part of Williams's enterprise was to articulate an account of legitimacy that was normative and not merely descriptive, and yet that did not represent a morality prior to politics. He achieved this, first, by distinguishing a political situation from a situation of war, suggesting that a political situation is characterised by the demand that the powerful find something to say to justify their coercion of the powerless (the 'Basic Legitimation Demand' or BLD), and, secondly, by distinguishing legitimacy from illegitimacy in terms of the degree to which the BLD is met. Williams takes the BLD to have been met where the justification for coercion offered by the powerful is deemed 'acceptable' to those subject to their power. This gives us what Paul Sagar helpfully characterises as an 'internalist' account of political legitimacy according to which (crudely) 'legitimacy is and can only be a function of the beliefs of those subject to power, and insofar as subjects believe that the power exercised over them is legitimate, *it therefore is*' (p. 114).

From the beginning, Williams's political realism has been dogged by the charge that it is not as distinctive as he and his followers seem to think it is. His claim that there can be a normative principle (like the BLD) that is not prior to politics necessarily collapses, so the argument goes, into the political 'moralism' he rejects. Unsurprisingly, this sort of charge recurs a few times in *Politics Recovered*. In this section I will consider one instance of the charge, as presented by Charles Larmore (another instance may be found in Freeden's contribution). I think Larmore gets Williams wrong, but his criticism raises some important questions about the role of the political theorist.

Larmore develops a discussion around Williams's thought that is in many ways sympathetic, but he cites one major area of disagreement over Williams's claim that the concept of legitimacy stands free from assumptions involving a morality prior to politics:

> Whatever the specific legitimation story may be, whether it invokes some mythical founding, God's purposes, the citizens' consent, or the leader's charisma, it embodies some idea of what entitles the state to exercise coercive power over its subjects. It appeals therefore to a moral principle describing the conditions under which coercive power may justly be exercised. … It is presumed … to express *a morality prior to politics* in that it has to be understood as having a validity antecedent to the authority the state aims thereby to acquire (p. 42).

This, Larmore claims, demonstrates that the concept of legitimacy cannot stand free from assumptions about morality that are prior to politics.

Larmore is obviously right that many legitimation stories will appeal to a morality prior to politics, but I do not see how this shows what he thinks it shows. The formulation of a legitimation story by a state is an exercise in first order political moralising and will of course appeal to all manner of moral ideas, many of which will be constructed as prior to politics. It is hard to see why Williams should be embarrassed by that. Indeed, as Larmore observes (p.43), Williams appears to acknowledge the fact on numerous occasions. Williams's point is surely that the production of these sorts of legitimation stories is not the

task of distinctively political thought ('realist' political theory is not the same as first order political moralising) and, moreover, that what legitimates the state is not the moralistic content of the story it tells, whether it is 'right', 'correct' or 'reasonable', say, but the fact that it is a story, whatever its content, that *makes sense* to those subject to the state's power. And the reasons why the acceptability of the legitimation story works to legitimate the state are not prior to politics, but inherent in the very idea of politics as Williams conceives it. In other words, the success of liberal legitimations in the modern world is, for Williams, not to be interpreted as a function of the validity of the pre-political moral principles upon which liberalism is sometimes thought to rest, but rather as a function of its wide (though not unfaltering) appeal as a political ideology concretely instantiated in social and political institutions.

So, I think Larmore misinterprets Williams on this, but his argument nevertheless opens up an interesting set of questions around the proper role of the political theorist, and of the relationship between what I have termed 'first order political moralising' and political theory. Specifically, there is a question of whose business it might be to formulate sophisticated first order liberal legitimation stories. It is not obvious to me that this could not be seen as a respectable domain of political theory in some sense, though it certainly departs from the self-understanding of most political theorists, who tend not to see themselves as liberal ideologists. I finish with some further reflections on this theme, as a couple of the essays in the collection speak to it in illuminating ways.

Williams himself held what is often taken for a very limited and chastened view of the limits of philosophy (and of the philosopher), suggesting that his own work largely consisted in reminding moral philosophers of 'truths about human life which are very well known to virtually all adult human beings except moral philosophers' (2005: 52). And, similarly, of political theory, he emphasised that it must 'shape its account of itself more realistically to what is platitudinously politics' (2005: 13). It may seem that the central task for the theorist here is one of correcting for the corruptions of theory by reporting what almost everybody already knows to be the case.

In his important contribution to the collection, Paul Sagar suggests what he takes to be a more ambitious role for political theory. In a discussion of Williams's 'critical theory test', which, for Williams, was a way of illustrating how oppressed people might come to repudiate their beliefs about the legitimacy of the ruling order upon recognising those beliefs as the sole product of the unacceptable power of the ruling order, Sagar suggests that Williams's view of the test, as an 'artifical rationalization' of what political actors do for themselves anyway, is inappropriately unambitious (p. 129-133; see Williams, 2002: 227). Building on the work of Sally Haslanger, Sagar suggests a more distinctive role for critical political theory. Such theory must, Sagar argues, acknowledge a dual purpose: to describe the world accurately, 'subject to the norms of truthful inquiry that govern other kinds of empirical research', but also to effect 'political change in the name of certain causes' (pp. 130-1). In this way, Sagar thinks it possible to tie political theory and political activism more closely together, breaking down 'an artificial and unnecessary divide between theorists and practitioners' (p. 131). He proceeds to imagine the way in which 'philosophically inclined thinkers' (p. 134) might contribute to emancipatory political causes by helping to give 'sharper or more compelling articulation to arguments for what is wrong with a present distribution of power' (p. 131).

There is undoubtedly something to be said for this, but I wonder whether the division between theorists and practitioners is really as 'artificial and unnecessary' as Sagar claims. He notes that one implication of his argument is that a critical theory that does not deliver a 'practical payout' in terms of advancing a political cause is 'inherently lacking' (p. 131), but we must also remember that a critical theory that fails to describe the world accurately is also flawed. It is thus worth pondering how the theorist should negotiate cases in which the imperatives of truthful inquiry are at odds with the imperatives of the political cause. This is a dilemma likely to present itself to theorists in a way (and with a force) that it will not present itself to practitioners. It is not always a practical advantage for activists to know the true limits of their ability to realise their aspirations. As David Owen writes, 'realism as an orientation in thinking is a disciplining of mind by the virtues of truth' (p. 77); it is an effort to combat wishful thinking. But wishful thinking and the sense of disappointment it breeds can potentially play a valuable psychological role for activists, both as a spur to the imagination of better futures and also as a motivational crutch in dark

times. The theorists' commitment to truthfulness means that they are, and ought to be, unreliable political allies.

Sagar's argument is an instance of a more general tendency of 'realist' thought to enlist political theorists to particular political causes. Elsewhere, Matt Sleat (2013) has urged that realism demands that the theorist throw in her lot with liberalism conceived as a 'partisan' doctrine (or else with one of its moral enemies). In a similar vein, Mark Philp has written that responsible political thought must 'inevitably be partisan' (2012, 646). They do not mean by this that theorists must inevitably identify themselves with specific political parties or movements. The claim is rather that there is nowhere for the theorist to stand except within a particular ideological perspective. This tendency is understandable, but I think it needs to be handled cautiously. Where the theorist is just another partisan, she will have nothing authoritative to say about the moral limits bearing on the contest between partisans of different stripes. And if political theory is to have anything distinctive or valuable to say, then surely it must have something to say about that contest.[1]

This tendency of realist thought may be related to the tendency noted by Owen (p. 86) for contemporary realists to 'focus on the state in isolation from the international system of states' and thus to bypass the arena of international relations and conflict. There is a disquieting possibility here well captured by Romain Rolland's, *Above the Battle*, written amid the carnage of the First World War:

> The most striking feature in this monstrous epic, the fact without precedent, is the unanimity for war in each of the nations engaged. An epidemic of homicidal fury, which started in Tokio ten years ago, has spread like a wave and overflowed the whole world. None has resisted it; no high thought has succeeded in keeping out of the reach of this scourge. A sort of demoniacal irony broods over this conflict of the nations, from which, whatever its result, only a mutilated Europe can emerge. For it is not racial passion alone which is hurling millions of men blindly one against another, so that not even neutral countries remain free of the dangerous thrill, but all the forces

> of the spirit, of reason, of faith, of poetry, and of science, all have placed themselves at the disposal of the armies in every state. (Rolland, 2010: 43)

This is probably a little melodramatic: after all, liberal partisans can still defend a politics of peace and compromise from within their partisan perspective. But the question persists of what then is to be said to those rival partisans who reject the liberal model of peace and compromise.[2] We should not agree too hastily to the removal of divisions between theorists and activists, nor to the idea that it is the proper role of the theorist to pick an 'army' and place herself at its disposal. Articulating a less chastened role for the theorist may have less to do with that sort of thing and more to do with the question, which was not lost on Williams but which seems in danger of becoming lost amid the drive to ever greater 'realism', of whether there can be a stable place for the theorist to stand that is both 'internal' to political life and yet also above the battle.

Acknowledgement

I thank Rob Jubb for comments and Demetris Tillyris for discussion of themes in this review.

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[1] I concede that the right conclusion to draw here might just be that political theory does not have anything distinctive or valuable to say, and that Sagar's portrait of the theorist as a more-than-usually-thoughtful hack is all that remains, unpalatable though it may be.

[2] I have elaborated this worry in greater detail elsewhere (see Edyvane, 2013: ch. 3).