

On Glen Newey's Prescient Political Realism

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I

In a 2015 post on the London Review of Books Blog Glen Newey regaled us with a rich morsel of autobiography:

In the early 1960s, the British state, having decided people could go to hell in their own way, legalised both suicide and off-course betting. Newly legal high-street bookies like my father, pushed up into 'turf accountants', still had to do their business behind frosted glass, lest passers-by be corrupted by glimpses of the depravities within. In a school-gate encounter with my mother, a fellow parent, Mr Crapp – a pillar of the local chartered accountants' guild and man of God – voiced his surprise that she had the brass to show herself in public, given her husband's job. *My doubts about moralism surfaced around this time*. Later, the parallel realisation dawned that bankers, mortgage lenders, insurers, even Mr Crapp – the plaster saints of market society – had feet of clay. (Newey 2015, emphasis added.)

Anyone familiar with Glen Newey and his academic work will read the sentence I italicised as an instance of characteristically self-effacing irony, as its author went on to become one of the most prominent realist critics of the still dominant but now somewhat embattled "ethics first" approach in Anglophone political philosophy. In this brief piece I would like to point out an additional, related layer of meaning, namely that of a hyperbole. I suggest, that is, that Newey did entertain serious worries about political moralism long before those became common currency in our discipline. That is to say, Newey's work from the late 1990s and early 2000s anticipated many of the themes that were to become the centrepieces of the revival of political realism prompted by the reception of work of Raymond Geuss and Bernard Williams published in the mid-to-late 2000s (Geuss 2008, Williams 2005).

In what follows I will first try to trace some key realist themes in Newey's work, to try and show how his realist insights preceded the explicit realist revival, and how they then developed in dialogue with the growing realist literature. I will then try to place Newey in a taxonomy of realisms, to the extent that his often illuminatingly contrarian positions allows for such an exercise. Finally, and more speculatively, I will consider some of Newey's posthumous work, to try and see where his unique approach to realism might take us next.

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II

The 2001 monograph *After Politics* is undoubtedly the largest piece of evidence of Newey's prescient realism, though as I will try to show it is by no means the earliest. Its central idea is indeed one that we now, in hindsight, easily associate with the realist revival. It is the idea that, for all the fanfare saluting the Rawls-induced resurrection of normative *political* theory in the second half of the 20th century, the revived subfield was too far removed from its ostensible subject matter to warrant its name. "Reports of the discipline's survival may have been exaggerated", Newey warns, because "few works of modern liberal political philosophy attempt to address the real world of politics, often applying inappropriate theoretical models to it when they do" (Newey, 2001 xxx). As I noted, this is by now a familiar realist methodological complaint,, though one Newey pairs with a more substantive claim aiming to show that the mainstream approach is also politically flawed, in the sense that it hides an attempted power-grab that seeks to re-centre politics around liberal priorities: "liberal political philosophers aim at the supersession of the ostensible subject-matter of their discipline – that is, politics; they aim at a post-political order" (Newey 2001: 1-2). I trust that this brief summary shows why I think it is fair to say that *After Politics* was, in many ways, ahead of its time.

What is more, I think those original contributions had blossomed much earlier, as far back as some of Newey's first publications, dating from the mid-nineties. Newey's early research topics were fairly typical for an analytically-trained British philosopher: his first articles concern the justifiability of political authority in the face of value pluralism. However, the perspective Newey brought to bear on this topic is far from commonplace, and reveals a realist position in the making. For example, in an early piece on liberal approaches to multiculturalism, Newey skewers a typical post-Rawlsian liberal position with a realist move: "Clashes of interest inevitably demand the exercise of power, however *bien pensant*--or chary of giving offence--those wielding it." (Newey 1996: 215) That is to say, political philosophers should not delude themselves that they can make political problems evaporate if only they can find the perfect mixture of pre-political moral commitments. Relatedly, in an article on political obligation from the same period, we find a sober conclusion that would resonate with some current realist views on legitimacy, especially of what I would call the 'ordorealist' variety, as we will see shortly: "A *raison d'etat* justification of state action, making no mention of citizens' obligations, may be the most we can hope for" (Newey 1996b: 23).

III

The examples above illustrate the long-running realist thread in Newey's thought, and how it informed the argument of *After Politics*.² Given this

² Similar observations could be made about the relationship between these realist insights and Newey's work on toleration (e.g. 2001, 2013; Galeotti 2019, Liveriero 2019) and on Hobbes (e.g. 2008): both of those bodies of work are characterized by a reckoning with the idea that all too often political problems do not admit of philosophical solutions that

long gestation, it is perhaps unsurprising that Newey became one of the most prominent and insightful exponents of the realist revival in contemporary Anglophone political philosophy, once the revival was conceptualized as such. What, then, is Newey's place in the emerging realist current?

As I argued at length elsewhere (Rossi 2019), I think it is possible and fruitful to distinguish between three main realist approaches, at least insofar as we take them as Weberian ideal types: ordorealism, contextual realism, and radical realism. While all three realist approaches reject the priority of even any role for pre-political moral commitments in normative political theory, they are in principle distinct, so while there is some overlap between them it is useful to think of them as ways of centering three different non-moralistic problems: the need for order and stability in the case of ordorealism, the question of the appropriate scope of political power for contextual realism, and the intertwining of power and knowledge for radical realism. Each approach, then, draws its political normativity from different sources.

Ordorealism leverages a distinction between politics and raw domination, or suspended warfare, to characterize the question of peace and security—the “first political question” in Williams's parlance—polities should prioritize (see e.g. Sleat 2013). The idea here is that, while security and peace are paramount, might is not right, because a kind of peace that is merely the product of raw domination does not count as an instance of a political relationship. The crucial difference between this approach and a moralist one lies in the fact that the normative work is done by a conceptual distinction between politics and suspended warfare, and not by a moral entitlement to a certain standard of treatment. A government that treats its subjects like the Spartans treated the Helots—to use Williams's example—is simply not a government but an enemy. And choosing whether to be a government or an enemy is outside of the scope of the theory of legitimacy.

Contextual realism adopts a more practice-dependent (Sangiovanni 2008) understanding of what it means to answer the first political question. This type of realism draws its normativity from an interpretation of the point and purpose of the institutions that answer the first political question. Such an approach allows for a wider set of normative considerations to influence an order's legitimacy, including, in some contexts, many issues not typically considered part of the purview of peace and security (e.g. distributive equality and welfare – see Jubb 2015).

Radical realism's main focus is on providing empirically-driven genealogies—both debunking and vindicatory—of the legitimating ideologies of practices, institutions, and even whole polities. Crudely, political realities and possibilities are often not as they seem. Both existing political orders and possible alternatives are often accepted or discarded for power-distorted reasons, which in turn is an epistemic flaw, in the sense that it sabotages our pursuit of the truth. Radical realism's normativity, then, is epistemic, as it seeks to ground critique not on moral grievances but on improving our understanding of how the world works (see Prinz & Rossi 2017, Rossi 2019, Rossi & Argenton forthcoming).

preserve all that is of value, let alone plausibly subordinate matters of power and interest to matters of morality (Rossi 2013).

With that taxonomy in place, I would tentatively suggest that Newey's realism evolved from a roughly ordorealist stance to a more contextual one, and that, despite his skepticism of the genealogical *Ideologiekritik* found in the radical approach, his most recent work may yield new insights for realists interested in ideology critique. The work on multiculturalism and political obligation highlighted above shows the clearest indication of the ordorealist leanings of Newey's early work. Already in *After Politics* and in some work on toleration from the same period, however, we begin to see a shift away from harsh *Realpolitik* or *raison d'état*, and towards a more inclusive account of political normativity.³ The position now seems to be centred on a distinction between the misguided search of a harmonious moral resolution of political problems, and a context-sensitive account of political accommodation, which isn't a mere watering-down of political morality, but rather a search for what we would now call a distinctly political normativity grounded in an understanding of, e.g., the practice of democratic decision-making (Newey 2001a, 2001b).

Newey then took up the issue of political normativity more explicitly in some more recent and—by now—more self-consciously realist work. For instance, in his contribution to the 2010 special issue of the *European Journal of Political Theory* that for many represents a sort of semi-official launch of the realist current, Newey argued for an avowedly anti-moralist and contextualist understanding of the type of normativity that can legitimate political orders: his realist approach

... does not attempt to establish a pre-existing order of reasons by reference to which legitimacy is to be understood. Reasons for acting politically, which include the understandings on which perceptions of legitimacy rest, are as much part of the local political culture as are, say, political institutions. This dims the prospects for theories which seek to lay down foundations for politics using reasons with purportedly universal domain. There is however no special reason to greet the specificity of political reasons with dismay. (Newey 2010: 450)

So Newey's earlier realist account of politics, which, given its focus on *raison d'état*, one might have considered more universalistic, gave way to a more contextual, even "relativist" (*ibid.*: 462-3) position. This reading of the position also allows us to see how, despite his skepticism about liberal moralism, Newey can still be considered a liberal (Morgan 2020), albeit a disillusioned, almost reticent liberal (hence his doubts on the more radical wing of realism, as we will see in the next section). Newey's message is indeed that liberalism doesn't have to be the pious moralistic enterprise it has become in the dominant Anglo-American tradition. Newey's rather contributes to alternative and certainly no less storied liberal tradition, or family of traditions. The first liberal lineage that comes to mind here is the "liberalism of fear" commonly associated with political realism (Shklar 1989), a variant of

³ Not that Newey was ever a fully-fledged ordorealist, even of the liberal variety. He didn't quite offer a *realpolitik*-motivated endorsement of liberalism as much as sort of diagnostic resignation to its structures and strictures.

which Newey investigated directly, especially through his work on John Gray's political thought (Horton & Newey 2007). Looking further back, it doesn't seem too far-fetched to also associate Newey to the longstanding Italian realist tradition. This tradition has its roots in Machiavelli and Guicciardini, flourishes in the Enlightenment era, and carries on through the 20th century in both socialist and liberal variants. I bring up this Italian tradition because I would like to suggest that it is possible, albeit speculatively, to associate Newey's reluctant liberalism with the strand of political thought that runs from Machiavelli's *ragion di stato* all the way to Benedetto Croce's subdued Hegelian Liberalism—a liberalism that, somewhat like Newey's, may be considered realist to the extent that it is built on a historical situatedness that, however, resists the temptation of teleological moralism (Bellamy 2013: 184).

IV

Let me now move on to some even more speculative thoughts about where Newey's thinking on realism might have been headed, and where it may lead us. I mentioned that he is sceptical of ideology critique, and so by extension would have been sceptical of radical realism. We can see this in the 2010 piece already: "Does it matter that power-relations influence a person's normative beliefs? [...] Attempts to free people by relieving them of dubiously acquired normative beliefs will have familiar perverse effects." (*Ibid.* 2010: 461).

A 2016 paper extends that line of thought. Though sadly posthumous, this piece displays Newey's characteristically contrarian ability to insightfully read arguments against themselves. By developing the notion of a "power loop", Newey criticises Bernard Williams's Critical Theory Principle—the idea that we can and should isolate ruling power-distorted elements in a political order's legitimation story—and even the very distinction between politics and suspended warfare. The idea is of a power loop is indeed that of the "ineliminability of the effect of force on how the political context of justification is understood" (Newey 2016). That is to say, whether we judge whether the first political question has been answered satisfactorily cannot be independent of the coercion that has partly shaped our way of conceptualizing our political predicament. This is a radicalization of Williams's (and Geuss's) critical-theoretic approach: Newey's idea is that, taken to its natural conclusion, ideology critique ends up proving too much, in a way that is reminiscent of moralistic approaches to legitimacy: "if the issue is fought out on the moralist's ground, anarchists are likely to have the better of it. The problem with anarchism is that it is not a political position – or at least, not unless it answers the basic political question, What do we do?" (2016: 12). The conclusion Newey seems to want to draw from this is, crudely, that we should abandon the project of ideology critique and reconcile ourselves to the strictures of existing state-based solutions to the problem of legitimacy. But is that the only possible result of that argument?

To conclude this brief essay I would like to sketch a Neweyan move against Newey, and read his argument against his own position and extend it in the service of radical realism. To do so, let us take a step back and look at the background to this view, namely Newey's "naturalist account of politics", based on the "broadly Aristotelian insight" that "political decisions are typically a bricolage created from found objects" (2013: location 784). It seems to me that that approach raises the

question of how old those found objects should be. Why start from the state? A political naturalist approach should start from the idea of the inevitability of coercive structures, but there is no need to start from currently existing coercive structures. Indeed, a look at the anthropological and archaeological evidence rather suggests that, for over 90% of human history, the “natural” type of polity was that of an acephalous order enforced through horizontal, non-centralised coercion (see Widerquist & McCall 2017 for an excellent survey of the evidence). Insofar as those societies were stateless, they would satisfy the desiderata of most contemporary anarchists, including realist ones (e.g. Brinn 2019). Newey is only partly right to claim that anarchism is a form of moralism (2016): it is only insofar as it rejects politics and/or the coercion that goes with it, but empirical evidence shows that that anarchism doesn’t need to do that. In fact I haven’t shown it, but merely pointed at the anarchism displayed by the overwhelming majority of human history. The key element that characterizes anarchism on this account is not the rejection of politics but the rejection of the state with its sovereign prerogatives (Raekstad 2016). Newey was right to say that liberal moralist consent-based realist theories lead to (moralistic) philosophical anarchism. But an empirically-grounded form of radical realism may just be able to offer a debunking genealogy of the statism implicit in mainstream theories of legitimacy, and a vindictory genealogy of anarchist political structures (for a similar argument, see Rossi & Argenton forthcoming). Newey might then still have asked whether this form of anarchism can answer the question of what to do. I happen to think that realists can demand the impossible, and that prefigurative politics could provide a pathway towards radically transformative political projects (Rossi 2019), so I don’t find the question troubling, at least in the form in which I, reading Newey’s work, am able to pose it. What I do find troubling and dejecting is that Glen Newey is no longer around to prove me wrong.⁴

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