

Can Realism Move Beyond a *Methodenstreit*?

The Political Theory of Political Thinking: The Anatomy of a Practice, by Michael Freedman, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013. 345 pp. *Liberal Realism: A Realist Theory of Liberal Politics*, by Matt Sleat, Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2013. 184 pp.

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I

At least two methodological debates are under way in contemporary political philosophy: one on (non-)ideal theory, and one on realism (and moralism). Crudely, the debate on ideal and non-ideal theory concerns the role of feasibility constraints in normative theorising.² The debate on realism and moralism concerns the relationship between moral and political normativity.³ One can be a realist and demand the impossible, as it were — ignore feasibility constraints, so long as one’s political norms aren’t grounded in moralistic, pre-political values.⁴ The two debates are orthogonal to each other, yet they are often mistakenly lumped together.⁵ Perhaps more importantly, only one debate—the one on realism—has far reaching transformative aims for political theory. The ideal theory debate is primarily intended as a way to make better sense of how to theorise *within* the still dominant paradigm set out by Rawls and Nozick.⁶ The proponents of realism think of their position as more of a rupture with the discipline’s current

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² See, e.g., Alan Hamlin, and Zofia Stemplowska. “Theory, Ideal Theory and the Theory of Ideals.” *Political Studies Review* 10, no. 1 (2012): 48–62. For a sceptical take on the debate see Jacob T. Levy, “There is No Such Thing as Ideal Theory” (April 3, 2014). Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2420125>.

³ See William A. Galston, “Realism in Political Theory”, *European Journal of Political Theory* 10, no. 4 (2010): 385–411; Enzo Rossi and Matt Sleat, ‘Realism in Normative Political Theory’, *Philosophy Compass*, forthcoming 2014. For a more critical angle see Lorna Finlayson, “With Radicals Like These, Who Needs Conservatives?”, *European Journal of Political Theory*, forthcoming, and David Runciman, “What Is Realistic Political Philosophy?” *Metaphilosophy* 43, no. 1 (2012): 58–70. I defend the distinction between realism and non-ideal theory sketched here in “Being Realistic and Demanding the Impossible”, Working paper, URL:

http://www.academia.edu/10140242/Being_Realistic_and_Demanding_the_Impossible. For a different take on the issue see Matt Sleat, “Realism, Liberalism and Non-Ideal Theory or, Are There Two Ways to Do Realistic Political Theory?” *Political Studies*, August 12, 2014, Online Early: doi:10.1111/1467-9248.12152.

⁴ For a discussion of this point see Robert Jubb and Enzo Rossi, “Political Norms and Moral Values”, *Journal of Philosophical Research*, forthcoming 2015 (Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2409896>), and the ensuing critical exchange with Eva Erman and Niklas Moeller.

⁵ See, for instance, Laura Valentini, “Ideal vs. Non-Ideal Theory: a Conceptual Map.” *Philosophy Compass* 7, no. 9 (August 22, 2012): 654–64. doi:10.1111/j.1747-9991.2012.00500.x.

⁶ Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice* is usually considered the paradigm-shifting work. That is right insofar as a Rawls’ book started a new conversation. Yet one may argue that Nozick’s methodology has been more influential: Rawls’ blend of empirical and normative elements has become less prevalent than Nozick’s style of theorising from first principles using abstract thought experiments to appeal to intuitions. Other influential proponents of this intuition-driven, moralistic methodology are Ronald Dworkin and especially G.A. Cohen. I criticise this approach in Enzo Rossi, “Facts, Principles, and Politics”, (April 2014). Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2378366> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2378366>.

mainstream: the issue isn't just to change the way in which we go from moral beliefs to political norms, but rather to change our starting point altogether.

But is there really more to realism than questions about how best to continue doing what we are already doing? Two recent books can serve as a testing ground for realism's claims about its import on the discipline. I will try to show that these books do go beyond the realist-moralist *Methodenstreit* on the sources of political normativity, though in different directions: one takes us in the realm of metatheoretical considerations (section II), the other is a genuine exercise in grounding liberal normative theory in a non-moralistic way (section III). Realism, this comparison suggests, does open new vistas, though their novelty is to a large extent relative to the last four decades, as realism is best thought of as a return to a more traditional way of doing political philosophy (section IV).

II

In *The Political Theory of Political Thinking*, Michael Freeden takes the *Methodenstreit* to the next level. He doesn't do realist theory, but neither does he simply preach about how one should or shouldn't do it. There's much more to this erudite book than a discussion of realism, but here I want to analyse the realist undertones of Freeden's account of the spectrum of possible modes of thinking about politics, normatively and descriptively — a standard dichotomy that Freeden wants to overcome, or at least finesse. He berates the relatively recent separation between political science and political theory, and the related colonisation of the latter by ethics-driven philosophy. Freeden's influential earlier work has largely been devoted to the study of ideology. This is a category broader than the subject matter of mainstream political theory and, for Freeden, devoid of the pejorative sense attached to it by Marxists and others. The study of ideology moves from the thought that essentially contestable political concepts (freedom, justice, equality, and the like) are best studied in the context of the discourses in which they are deployed — including discourses well outside academic political theory. That is because what drives the decontestation of such concepts is often extra-theoretical: it's a political ideal and/or a struggle for power that leads us to see freedom as a matter of self-actualisation rather than non-interference, say. So attention to ideology illuminates both the content of political theory and the role of political thought in wider political processes. The descriptive and normative study of politics don't float free of each other, *pace* the prevailing division of labour in contemporary academia.

Now Freeden takes this research programme one step further by introducing a distinction between *thinking about politics* and *thinking politically*. We think about politics when we explicitly decontest political terms such as freedom, power, or equality. We think politically when, without resorting to political vocabulary, we articulate our sensitivity or attitude to political issues, even when we remain unaware of the political import of our thoughts. 'I'm in a hurry, waiter, can we place our order now?' and 'Mind your own business' are some of Freeden's felicitous examples,⁷ which he then supplements with an 'anatomy' of the recurrent themes of political thinking.⁸ So Freeden identifies three overarching themes (directing collective support, ranking states of affairs, and making decisions), and provides a list of six features that allow us to identify a particular instance of social conduct as political (that is, any of the six is a necessary and

⁷ *The Political Theory of Political Thinking* (cit.), 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

sufficient condition of politics), but maintains that there is no single dominant feature shared between all instances of the political.⁹ This stance leads to the book's rich patchwork of case studies of instances of political thinking, often juxtaposed with methodological and substantive considerations about the interaction between political thinking and a particular ideology. For instance, Freedden's discussion of liberal attitudes towards the wider thought-practice of envisioning the future is particularly illuminating, as it brings out the tensions between liberalism's sceptical and conservative roots and its more progressive aspirations.¹⁰

That exemplar shows how Freedden's approach may bear fruits of interest to political theorists. Yet one may question whether some of the results he obtains may also be obtained through other, more traditional avenues. One may also wonder whether the sum of those parts—those vignettes featuring the interaction of political thinking and political theory and ideology—amounts to more than the whole. There is no overarching position that emerges from the study of political thinking, at least so far. But then again, it's not clear why one would expect a firm position from an exploratory foray.

At any rate the main point to consider is the idea that if we want to understand the interaction and mutual feedback between political processes and the ways in which we make sense of them, we shouldn't restrict our analysis to *explicitly* political discourse. There is more to political discourse than ideology. Our understanding of the impact of semantic constructions on the political world (and vice versa) remains incomplete until we recognise that the articulation of political claims does not always require the deployment of political terms. The idea of a political theory of political thinking is an attempt to fill this gap. But how does Freedden's project relate to the realist research programme, and in what sense can we say that it is a metatheoretical project?

The second question may be prompted by the supposition that Freedden has simply identified an understudied empirical aspect of politics. I take it that is indeed part of his programme. But the more central point here concerns the relation between thinking politically and the active articulation of normative political theory. This point is metatheoretical insofar as it does not tell us how to do political theory (that would be the sort of theoretical debate that characterises the current *Methodenstreit*); it rather tells us that all normative theories and all methodological stances have ramifications beyond the texts they consist of, and beyond the political actions and explicitly political discourses they engender. What is more, attention to thinking politically bridges the traditional gap between the study of political thought and political behaviour. There's more to political theory than simply action-guidance and the provision of rhetorical devices, and there's more to political behaviour than exercises of power and political speech acts.

Questions remain on the extent to which this point is substantially different from the point, familiar especially from feminist and critical theory, that the personal is political or, more broadly, that the political encompasses more than just public life. Nonetheless Freedden's angle retains its originality insofar as it's metatheoretical: unlike critical theory, it is not tied to a first order position or even to a methodological current of normative theory. It is a nuanced look at the interactions between the academic study of politics and the real political world.

That leads us to Freedden's take on realism. He notes the "strong affinity" between his programme and the new realism; yet he insists that his realism is descriptive rather than

⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 272-274.

prescriptive.¹¹ The affinity between the study of political thinking and realism, as we just noted, resides in the attention to how politics actually unfolds, as opposed to the idealised accounts of politics found both in political theory and in the study of political behaviour. Attention to thinking politically is attention to a mode of politics that is as central as it is resistant to the methodological straightjackets of mainstream political theory and political science—hence Freedman’s hostility to this sub-disciplinary divide. To be fair to the mainstream, though, one should also acknowledge a trade-off here: Freedman’s self-avowedly fox-like eclecticism comes with the downside of a sophisticated yet occasionally facile intellectual fragmentation, whereas more hedgehog-like traditional approaches deliver firm normative conclusions or—usually and sadly and exclusive disjunction—testable empirical claims.

On the other hand, and despite its name, Freedman’s descriptive realism may take us some way towards recomposing the normative-empirical fracture. The idea here is that the analysis of political thinking affords a more dispassionately realistic account of the relationship between political theory and real politics. This point is the upshot of a two-pronged critique of realism, directed at each of its main exponents, Raymond Geuss and Bernard Williams. In both cases Freedman’s contention is that methodological appeals to realism conceal substantive normative positions: a critical-theoretic ethical stance in Geuss’ case, and a marked preference for agonistic rather than consensual democracy in Williams’ case.¹² Need realists worry much about those charges? Geuss would have no need to deny that his realism stems, in part, from a first-order hostility to Kantian liberalism.¹³ Likewise, Williams could comfortably own up to the links between his realism, his liberalism, and his metaethical pluralism.¹⁴ Those normative—yet not moralistic—commitments don’t detract from the role of descriptive elements in their theories (most notably the role of power in Geuss, and of belief in legitimacy in Williams). So it seems fair to say that Geuss’ and Williams’ realism isn’t merely prescriptive; rather, it emphasises a narrower set of descriptive elements relative to Freedman’s approach. If there is any hope for a political theory that bridges the normative-empirical gap beyond the consideration of feasibility constraints envisaged by non-ideal theory, it appears this hope lies with realism.¹⁵

III

To see whether that hope may be fulfilled, we now turn to a contribution that takes us beyond the *Methodenstreit* in the opposite direction—first-order theory. Matt Sleat offers the first book-length attempt to ground liberalism on realist commitments. More precisely, Sleat’s project isn’t so much to show that realism leads to liberalism, but rather that there is a form of liberalism that is compatible with realism. And, relatedly, that most mainstreams forms of liberalism fall short of realism’s desiderata. In fact there are really two liberalisms in Sleat’s book (as it were): there’s liberalism in the pejorative sense, i.e. Neo-Kantian, post-Rawlsian moralistic liberalism,

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹² *Ibid.*, 19-20, 55-57.

¹³ I discuss Geuss’ position in some detail in Enzo Rossi, “Reality and Imagination in Political Theory and Practice: on Raymond Geuss’s Realism.” *European Journal of Political Theory* 9, no. 4 (2010): 504–12.

¹⁴ I discuss Williams’ realism in Enzo Rossi, “Consensus, Compromise, Justice and Legitimacy”, *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 16, no. 4 (2013): 557–72.

¹⁵ Practice-dependence also comes to mind here. To some extent this may be considered a form of realism (see Andrea Sangiovanni, “Justice and the Priority of Politics to Morality.” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 16, no. 2 (2008): 137–64). For a discussion of realism in relation to practice dependence see Robert Jubb, “Recover it from the Facts as We Know Them”, *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, forthcoming, and Enzo Rossi, “Justice, Legitimacy and (Normative) Authority for Political Realists.” *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 15, no. 2 (2012): 149–64.

and then there's what liberalism might be if erected on what he takes to be the more solid foundation of realism. Liberalism in the pejorative sense and realism are antithetical dispositions of mind more than they are incompatible first-order positions. The book's argument, then, is a dialectic between realism and liberalism-in-the-pejorative-sense, with realist liberalism emerging as a synthesis.

What is wrong with moralistic liberalism, and how can realism put liberalism to rights? Sleat's attack on mainstream liberalism is somewhat narrower than the full spectrum rejection of moralistic—or 'ethics first'—political philosophy. A typical realist charge against moralism is that ethics is not a good guide to politics. The hostility to consensus-driven politics is then arguably derived from that wider point: if ethics could generate consensus then we wouldn't need politics (that is, structured coercion) to coordinate our activities. Sleat however doesn't take this route. To simplify his rather nuanced view, we can say that he offers a freestanding argument against the search for liberal consensus. This argument is compatible with the broader realist position I just canvassed, but it has a lighter set of foundational commitments. As I will try to show in what follows, this is a double-edged sword.

Sleat's argument against consensus oscillates between a critique of its desirability and of its feasibility: the search for consensus is a misunderstanding of the inherently coercive nature of politics, and so is both chimeric and stifling of political identities.¹⁶ The two prongs of this argument complement each other and weave together strands from classical and recent realist political philosophy, and themes from international relations theory—Sleat's argument is particularly noteworthy for bringing together those traditions.¹⁷ Besides, insofar as consensus-driven liberalism is often presented as a procedural system for the adjudication of political claims, it is bound to obscure liberal partisanship under a cloak of putative neutrality. So the realist liberalism championed by Sleat does not pretend to be above the political fray. It is explicit about its hegemonic nature. One of Sleat's important insights, then, is that this hegemony is liberal insofar as it is deliberately moderate and so respects the rights of dissenters.¹⁸

The focus on conflict and persistent disagreement allows Sleat to bypass some thorny issues familiar to realists, most notably the relationship between ethics and politics and, relatedly, the theory of ideology. Whether this is an advantage may largely depend on one's foundationalist or antifoundationalist leanings. Sleat belongs to the latter camp. For instance, he approvingly refers to realists' tendency "to shy away from making grand claims about human nature"¹⁹ (by contrast, I would argue that there are arguments internal to realism that could be brought to bear on the issue of whether political theorists need to make such grand claims).

Those of a less foundationalist bent may take the lead from Sleat's argument and construct further first-order realist theories on the basis of observations about the phenomenology of political life, without delving into the matter of the grounds of our normative beliefs. That does rule out consensus-based forms of liberalism, however realists of a more foundationalist inclination may worry that other forms of moralism are left intact. Forms of liberal moralism that don't rely on consensus but still generate political prescriptions from pre-political moral commitments, such as the consequentialist positions of J.S. Mill or Joseph Raz, may in the end

¹⁶ *Liberal Realism* (cit.), 52-57.

¹⁷ Also see Duncan Bell, "Under a Empty Sky: Realism and Political Theory" in D. Bell (ed.), *Political Thought and International Relations*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008.

¹⁸ *Liberal Realism* (cit.), 157-160.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 54.

be quite similar to Sleat's moderately hegemonic liberalism, insofar as they rely on an explicit, substantive defence of liberal values.²⁰ Sleat may retort that those values need not be grounded in pre-political moral beliefs, but then to substantiate that claim he would have to delve into more foundationalist claims about the nature and origin of political normativity.²¹ In other words, it is not clear to me whether realists can disentangle the consensus argument from the ethics-first argument and the theory of ideology.

So we seem to have a choice between a more systematic type of realism that accounts for the foundations of political normativity, and a more phenomenological realism that relies on a description of the conflictual dynamics of political life.²² The former realism is more comprehensive in its rejection of political moralism. The latter (Sleat's) is more ecumenical in the sorts of philosophical commitments it can accommodate.

We have noted that the choice between those two ways of doing realism seems to rest on one's attitude towards foundationalism; but there may be a further portion of logical space available to realists. We may be able to develop a position such as Williams' in a way that produces a positive sum between the trade-offs on either side — arguably Sleat's position may also be read in this light. We may call this systematic (rather than postmodern or Rortyan) antifoundationalism about politics. The roughly Nietzschean and Humean idea would be to reject rather than avoid foundational commitments—scepticism rather than neutrality about the grounds of deep normative commitments: politics just is the creation of normative orders for the solution of a certain class of problems,²³ and that is why we are epistemically entitled to study it as an autonomous sphere.

It remains unclear to what extent Williams had in mind a realism of this sort. His praise of Shklar's philosophically abstemious “liberalism of fear” points in quite an unsystematic antifoundationalist direction²⁴, yet a look at his wider body of work should make clear that realism fits within a sharp yet sceptical picture of the philosophical underpinnings of moral and political agency—a picture that should at least be compatible with systematic antifoundationalism.²⁵ That may be the best way to read Williams (and Sleat) and, more importantly, the best way to do first-order realist political theory.

IV

Comparison of these two books shows that realist themes can take the discipline either side of a mere *Methodenstreit*. Freedman shows us how the realist agenda can illuminate the nature of

²⁰ Williams calls this ‘enactment model’ moralism. See “Realism and Moralism in Political Theory”, in *In the Beginning Was the Deed*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005: 1. Also, Sleat and other realists’ focus on Kant as the originator of political moralism may well irritate close readers of Kant’s political philosophy: see Arthur Ripstein, *Force and Freedom*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009..

²¹ One realist strategy here would be to take the view that realism needs a more systematic foundation, for instance in a form of full-blown Aristotelian political naturalism. I canvass this research programme in Enzo Rossi, “Reality and Imagination in Political Theory and Practice”(cit.) and other forthcoming work.

²² For what it’s worth, Rorty’s antifoundationalism seems to have frustrated Raymond Geuss: see “Richard Rorty at Princeton”, *Arion* 15, no. 3 (2008) 85-100; though that may be largely due to Rorty’s insistence that antifoundationalism and liberalism are mutually supportive.

²³ See Andrew Sabl, *Hume’s Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012.

²⁴ See Katrina Forrester, “Judith Shklar, Bernard Williams and political realism.” *European Journal of Political Theory* 11, no. 3 (2012) 247-72.

²⁵ See Paul Sagar, “From Scepticism to Liberalism?” *Political Studies*, forthcoming. Edward Hall also distinguishes Williams’ position from crude postmodern antifoundationalism in “Contingency, Confidence and Liberalism in the Political Thought of Bernard Williams.” *Social Theory and Practice*, forthcoming.

political theory and of its relation to politics regardless of one's methodological or substantive leanings. Sleat shows us that a realist *forma mentis* can provide a robust basis for first-order normative political theory—liberal in his case, but it would not be too difficult to envisage other realist theories of different ideological colour.²⁶

That is a positive assessment of realism's prospects. Complaining that such optimism ill befits realism won't do: we started out with a distinction between non-ideal theory and realism, and noted that only the former is concerned with feasibility. The matter of utopianism may be a separate concern—realists may want to distinguish between utopia as moralistic wishful thinking *vs* utopia as political vision for radical transformation.²⁷ In other words, there is a consistent reading of the 1968-era exhortation to be realistic and demand the impossible. At any rate, optimism about a disruptive theoretical research programme is only moderately politically utopian, despite the sociology of academia.

Those familiar with the evolution of contemporary political theory over the last three decades or so may remain sceptical. The 1980s saw the heyday of another minority view that promised to transform the discipline: communitarianism. Why did communitarianism peter out, and why shouldn't we expect the same from realism? My hypothesis is that communitarianism's failure to make a lasting positive contribution is due to its attempt to establish new values such as community *in opposition* to hegemonic ones like individual freedom. Communitarianism partly tweaked mainstream liberalism, but that was a paltry result relative to its declared ambitions.

There is, I think, reason to hope that realism won't be the next victim of that process of hegemonic phagocytation. Realism doesn't clash with values, hegemonic or otherwise. It redescribes or decontests them in its own way. For instance, realist liberals are not against individual freedom or equality, but they're against moralised understandings of those values. So realism can move itself and the discipline beyond the *Methodenstreit*. And given the present dominance of 'ethics first' political philosophy, realism has the potential to be radically transformative.²⁸

Yet let us close with a note of caution, or a reality-check: if we look at political philosophy pre-1971, or perhaps more aptly pre-1974, then realism's now contentious blend of normative and empirical theory begins to look like a return to a more traditional way of doing political philosophy. Not all transformations are innovations, and that is not necessarily a bad thing. Or at least conservative, moderate and radical realists will take their respective sides on that question.

²⁶ For a brief discussion of some of those possibilities see Enzo Rossi and Matt Sleat, "Realism in Normative Political Theory" (cit.).

²⁷ See Raymond Geuss, "Realismus, Wunschdenken, Utopie", *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 58, no 3 (2010) 419-429, and E.O. Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, London, UK: Verso, 2008.

²⁸ The most severe casualties of such a transformation may however not be Rawlsianism as much as the more moral intuition-driven approaches spearheaded by theorists like Robert Nozick or G.A. Cohen. On this point see James Gledhill, "Rawls and Realism." *Social Theory and Practice* 38, no. 1 (2010) ; Robert Jubb, "Playing Kant at the Court of King Arthur." *Political Studies*, April 17, 2014, Online Early: i:10.1111/1467-9248.12132; Alan Thomas, "Rawls and Political Realism." *European Journal of Political Theory*, forthcoming.

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