

# POLITICAL REALISM, CONTINGENCY AND PHILOSOPHY

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## **Introduction**

The relationship between political theorists and the time of politics is a complex one. Any theorist who emphasises the importance of the temporal and historical dimensions of politics will be naturally sceptical about the rational and ethical purpose of normative political theory itself. Recognition of the temporality of politics leads philosophers to unfold their conception of human reason in relation to the course of events, and further the role that they assign to normative theory and contingency constitute a limit to human reason in regulating and stemming the course of politics? In what sense can political theory remain consistent with the temporal and contingent aspects of politics? William Galston<sup>1</sup> has somehow kicked off this debate in pointing out that for the last decade, a number of political theorists have been criti-

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<sup>1</sup> Galston, William, "Realism in political theory" in *European Journal of Political Theory* 9 (2010) pp.385–411.

cal towards the abstract theorisation of liberalism and the way in which liberal theorists neglects the fact of political contingency. Galston uses Bernard Williams's term "realism"<sup>2</sup> to identify this critical strand. According to Galston, this "realist turn" has emerged as a critique of "political moralism" associated with post-Rawlsian political theory (John Rawls<sup>3</sup>; Ronald Dworkin<sup>4</sup>; Jürgen Habermas<sup>5</sup>). Since the publication of Galston's article, one can observe a "realist revival" in British political theory, although, Galston himself is unclear about the consistency of these realist theorists (Bernard Williams, Stuart Hampshire, John Dunn, Richard Bellamy, Raymond Geuss, John Gray etc.), for they come from quite different normative backgrounds. Yet, their common denominator lies in the recognition of the temporal, contingent and practical aspects of politics.<sup>6</sup>

The general argument of this article consists therefore in unraveling the normative issues raised by political realism and pointing out its (non-exhaustive) limits. My intention is not to disparage entirely its critical relevance though; notably against the revival of non-historical and utopian political ideologies. I rather purport to refine the philosophical and normative claims of contemporary realism and pay more attention to its philosophical premises. I first instance *via* a comparative analysis of Machiavelli's and Hobbes's theorisation of political temporality that political realism does not work as a consistent normative strand of political theory. I thus raise some concerns about the extent to which political realism can consolidate a clear cut normative argument. The fact that Galston identifies John Gray and Bonnie Honnig as realists does not do justice to their distinctive philosophical claim. Realism often works as a superficial theoretical label, which flattens and undermines the meaning and the stake of the various arguments associated with it. Following this, I suggest that the recent revival of political real-

2 Williams, Bernard, *In the Beginning Was the Deed* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2005).

3 Rawls, John, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford Paper Backs 1973).

4 Dworkin, Ronald, *Taking Rights Seriously* (London: Duckworth 2002).

5 Habermas, Jürgen, *The Post-National Constellation: Political Essays*, (Cambridge: MIT Press 2001).

6 Abin, Esther, *Rationality and morality in political theory: a paradigm shift*, PhD Thesis (2011) Keele University.

ism and its corollary critique of the place of ethical and rational norms within politics entail almost logically a form of rejection of political philosophy. For political philosophy provides the concepts and the arguments by which political norms can be valued, endorsed or contested, philosophy enables politics to be meaningful and arguable beyond *defactoist* and positivist arguments. Last, I suggest that the quest for a “realist” political theory advances arguments that end up intentionally or not as a justification of political expediency.

### **Before political realism: the political philosophy of temporality and contingency**

In support of Raymond Geuss<sup>7</sup>, the categorisation of realism and moralism in terms of “is *versus* ought” does not necessarily capture the most distinctive features of realism. In fact, one can hardly consider the question of realism without coming across the issues of time and contingency, for they both frame the way in which political philosophers reflect about rationality and morality in politics.<sup>8</sup>

To recognise political contingency is also to recognise a limitation to the exercise of rationality and ethics within politics. Geuss, for instance, insists on the changing character of values, beliefs and morality and argues that a suitable political theory cannot yield anything *practically* relevant without taking those changes into consideration. As he puts it: “Politics is in part informed by and in part an attempt to manage some of these changes. In addition, as people act on their values, moral views, and conceptions of the good life, these values and conceptions often change precisely as the result of being ‘put in practice.’”<sup>9</sup>

Historically, the recognition of temporal contingency in political theory reflects the advent of modernity whereby politics *on earth* is no longer seen to reflect the omnipotence of a divine will; it is recognised that political will is inherently limited by the fragility of the human

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7 Geuss, Raymond, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2008).

8 Abin, *Rationality and morality in political theory: a paradigm shift*.

9 Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, pp. 4-5.

condition. There have been various representations of political contingency throughout history.<sup>10</sup> Machiavelli and his heirs provide a distinctive account of the spatio-temporal dimension of politics – a time of the present rather than eternity, contexts rather than universals, changes rather than permanency, fluctuations and cycles rather than linearity. Political actors perform “in a universe of moral stillness” for there are “no prefigured meanings, no implicit teleology and no comforting backdrop of a political cosmos, ruled by a divine monarch and offering a pattern of earthly rulers.”<sup>11</sup> For all political plans and actions are at the mercy of contingency, politics is associated with an art, a *techne*, whose function is to try to tame the course of political events. Contingency is thus central to a realistic account of political theory and the way contingency is articulated with the role and capacity of rational and moral norms contributes to shaping specific kinds of normative orders. Machiavelli and Hobbes are, in this respect, both considered to be “realists”<sup>12</sup> although their political philosophies of time are almost polar opposites. In order to grasp the differences between Machiavelli’s and Hobbes’s theories, it may be helpful to leave the concept of “realism” aside for some time and consider how both theories engage with the question of rationality and ethics with regard to the question of time and contingency.<sup>13</sup> Interpretations of Hobbes’s and Machiavelli’s texts result in two very distinct accounts of the relationship between human reason and the course of political events. The Machiavellian account of politics is centred on a particular understanding of time in politics; it interprets time and its contingent effects as being fully involved in the practice of political rationality and ethics. Hobbes’s account of time is very differ-

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10 Orr, Robert, “Time Motif in Machiavelli”, in Martin Fleisher (ed.) *Machiavelli and the Nature of Political Thought* (London: Croom Helm 1973), pp. 198-199.

11 Wolin, Sheldon, *Politics and Vision* (Boston: Little Brown and Company 1960), p. 224.

12 In so far as the term “political realism” is anachronistic and cannot be originally associated with Hobbes’s and Machiavelli’s political philosophy.

13 I do not engage, in that respect, in a literal analysis of Machiavelli’s and Hobbes’s respective works, but rather in the way both philosophies are important resources for realism in political theory. I thus refer to both philosophies by drawing on their respective recent interpretations.

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ent, for it draws on his scientific ambition to liberate the human condition from the impediments of temporal contingency that, in Hobbes's own time, included civil wars and religious conflicts. His account of rationality and morality is intended to nullify the contingent effects of time upon people's political condition. These different attitudes towards temporality entail different political philosophies and different political views, a distinction that has so far been ignored by contemporary realist theorists. It may be useful to briefly articulate what I mean by Machiavellian and Hobbesian attitudes towards temporality in politics. I mainly use, for that purpose, Robert Orr's,<sup>14</sup> Sheldon Wolin's<sup>15</sup> and J.G.A. Pocock's<sup>16</sup> theoretical and interpretative works on "time" and "ethics" in the thought of Hobbes and Machiavelli.

Machiavelli locates his political theory in time, for the world, according to him, is ruled by temporal boundaries. Time expresses itself through series of events whereby no timeless essence, no eternity, no present can stop its flux.<sup>17</sup> Time is also central to his representation of political norms and indeed, is at the foundation of his political and moral philosophy. The latter consists in reconciling contingent (temporal) circumstances with political rationality and morality. His concept of "Fortuna"<sup>18</sup> is that of a time that intervenes in human affairs and creates new circumstances, new political configurations. *Fortuna* is thus the engine of human events; it either brings luck and prosperity or misfortune and catastrophe. In other words, Fortuna simply "tests" human ability to withstand the world of contingency. This resistance involves a certain degree of rational anticipation and intuition as well as a sense of morality that will further both human values and political ambition.

Political virtue is, in this context, an intelligent precaution to "mitigate and soften the impacts of events".<sup>19</sup> It is important to emphasise that Machiavelli's political theory does not disparage morality as such

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14 Orr, "Time Motif in Machiavelli".

15 Wolin, *Politics and Vision*.

16 Pocock, J.G.A., *Politics, Language and Time* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd. 1972).

17 Orr, "Time Motif in Machiavelli", p. 188.

18 Machiavelli, Niccolo, *The Prince*, ed. R.M. Adams (London: W.W. Norton & Company 1992), pp. 67-68, 125, 143.

19 Orr, "Time Motif in Machiavelli", p. 202.

(as distinct from conventional, e.g. Christian-Ciceronian morality). In Machiavelli's view, moral life implies "recognition of its own contingency that does not attempt to slip out of the time scale we know into some other, rooted in eternity or in some foreordained schedule of events".<sup>20</sup> He is not directly concerned with the simple question of whether or not one should be moral; in general terms, he takes for granted republican principles and the desirability of securing the peace and prosperity of Florence. He is thus not a cynical or amoral political thinker but rather subordinates conventional morality to the attainment of the political goals that he praises or favours. Machiavelli insists though that morality cannot apply to politics "out of political time", that is, regardless of the changing circumstances and configurations of political situations: "To adopt the rules of accepted morality was to bind one's behaviour by a set of consistent habits. But rigidities in behaviour were not suited to the vagaries of an inconsistent world."<sup>21</sup> In other words, his political morality is consistent with his account of political time. It does not stand as a sort of atemporal normative imperative beyond the contingent circumstances of politics – it is entangled with those circumstances: "Machiavelli's concern with the shortcomings of traditional ethics and his quest for a suitable political ethic stemmed from a profound belief in the discontinuities of human existence."<sup>22</sup>

Hobbes's political philosophy is based upon the artificial structure of a rationalist and systematic political rhetoric. His theory acknowledges the contingency of events in politics, which are part of the contingency of the physical world although human reason cannot control or anticipate the contingent course of events, for "God is author of them".<sup>23</sup> As opposed to Machiavelli's philosophy, which seeks to provide human reason and morality with the necessary imagination and talent so as to anticipate and respond to the intervention of *Fortuna*, Hobbes's philosophy divorces the world of contingency from that of politics. He thereby creates an artificial order whereby politics is liberated from uncertainty. Politics becomes an area of freedom and safety that contrasts again ar-

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20 Orr, "Time Motif in Machiavelli", p. 206.

21 Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, p. 225.

22 Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, p. 227.

23 Pocock, *Politics, Language and Time*, p. 156.

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tificially with the state of nature, which represents the world of contingency, fear and enslavement by the strongest: “the condition of political nothingness”.<sup>24</sup> There is a close relationship between Hobbes’s scientific beliefs and his understanding of political rationality: “The claims of science, that the mysterious phenomena of the universe were open and accessible to the methods of mathematics, appeared so undeniable to a mind like Hobbes that he boldly prepared to apply the same assumption to the political world.”<sup>25</sup> The world of politics depends, for Hobbes, on a structural logic of rationalist and mechanical orders of truth and values accessible to men, provided that they follow those paradigmatic orders. Hobbes thus invents the permanent and abstract time of the modern state. It is synchronic, one-dimensional and unhistorical:

Hobbes has followed the pattern, very common in the history of Western philosophy, of removing from the domain of political time into that of political space, a removal usually carried out for precisely the reason which he gives: the sequence of events in time cannot be known with certainty sufficient to be termed “philosophical.” Only by abandoning diachronic for philosophical thinking can we understand scientifically how political authority must come into being, or erect a system of authority on a foundation of rational certainty.<sup>26</sup>

It thus seems that the association of “real world politics” with the political theory of Hobbes is severely misleading. Hobbes’s political time is pure fiction; it has nothing to do with the contingent and “natural” world of physical phenomena, indeed, his intention is to escape from it. This theoretical escape derives from the modern belief that hu-

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24 Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, p. 244. Wolin points out that although the “state of nature” is an artificial and fictional conceptual creation, the latter is motivated by historical circumstances whereby the state of nature was “the dramatic contrast to their deep belief in the possibilities of political construction” as well as “the source of the anxiety which shaded their hopes and caused their dogmas to trail off into questions”.

25 Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, p. 243.

26 Pocock, *Politics, Language and Time*, pp. 157-158.

man rationality can recreate a world of its own through the lights of science and mathematics. As Wolin puts it: "There was a potential congruence between the phenomena of politics and the concepts of human mind, provided that these concepts were founded on the right method. When armed with the right method, and further armed with opportunity, man could construct a political order as timeless as Euclidean theorem."<sup>27</sup> Hobbes's alleged political "realism" is thus anything but the acceptance of the temporal and contingent aspects of politics. His political philosophy is the promotion of a moralistic order of knowledge under the control of rationality and faith, a philosophy that is "comparable in certainty to the truths of geometry, and *pari passu*, superior to the contingent truths of physics."<sup>28</sup> Arising from this, the only common denominator between Hobbes's and Machiavelli's account of political theory is the way in which they found normative political orders upon the relationship between rationality, morality and contingency.

### **On the impossibility to grasp the reality of politics *theoretically***

In giving due acknowledgment to the temporal and contingent aspects of politics, realism raises a number of questions concerning the way it is accounted for in political theory. Part of realist claims advance a view of political philosophy that denies its status as sub-branch of moral philosophy. This is particularly true in *After Politics*<sup>29</sup> whose author, Glen Newey, is seen by Galston as a representative of the "Realist School". Newey's main claim may be summarised as follows:

The normative bias in contemporary political philosophy consists partly in its failure to establish methods and aims distinct from those of ethical theory. But it is also due to the fact that political philosophy has been largely given over to normative theorising, or what is often called "applied ethics." I do not deny that this form of theo-

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27 Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, p. 243.

28 Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, pp. 246-247.

29 Newey, Glen, *After Politics* (London: Palgrave 2001).

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rising has its place within the discipline. But there can also be cognitive gain in description and the discipline as currently practised is perhaps disproportionately concerned with normative theory. Just as moral philosophers can usefully address the moral life in all its imperfection, so political philosophy can, and should, address that of the political life.<sup>30</sup>

Newey's claim is not meant to contest the philosophy of politics *tout court*, rather the *moral* dimension of political philosophy. In other words, he criticises moral philosophy or normative ethics for being inappropriate in the philosophical study of politics: "Insofar as political philosophy has aimed at articulating the guiding principles and institutional matrix of the ideally just society, it has had little to say philosophically about politics."<sup>31</sup> What exactly lies behind Newey's meta-philosophical critical concerns? Besides the fact that there may be inherent tensions between "real world politics" and any political theory, Newey is critical of the way contemporary political philosophers approach politics, for they presuppose an "anti-political reductivism" that "expresses a view of politics characteristic of liberal democracies".<sup>32</sup> Put differently, contemporary political philosophy is *partisan* in the sense that it formulates and, by the same token, promotes, the normative foundation of liberalism and aims for the ethical application of liberal norms in politics, in particular, that of the "rejection of politics".<sup>33</sup>

Besides this argument, Newey engages in a methodological - not to say a genealogical - reflection over the foundations and the practical rationality of contemporary political philosophy. He argues that political philosophers withdraw the historical and temporal dimension that surrounds philosophical texts about politics; these philosophers are said to promote their (liberal) moral views by turning them into some sort of "timeless body of truth"<sup>34</sup> or "trans-historical truth".<sup>35</sup> The latter, he

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30 Newey, *After Politics*, p. 16.

31 Newey, *After Politics*, p. 17.

32 Newey, *After Politics*, p. 18.

33 Newey, *After Politics*, p. 22.

34 Newey, *After Politics*, p. 20.

35 Newey, *After Politics*, p. 20.

argues, is used by liberal philosophers as a unilateral and partisan framework of analysis applicable to any questions in political philosophy:

To the extent that a text qualifies for the canon by memorably addressing a set of timeless concerns, it comes ready-interpreted. These concerns are not, however, usually taken to be political. In practice they amount to the implicit belief that there are “truths” of ethics or human nature which transcend the contextual particularity of the texts’ production. Since this is taken to comprehend the political circumstances in which the texts were written, it is inferred that their philosophical value lies not merely outside these circumstances, but outside politics *tout court*. Thus there is a dichotomy between politics, as the sphere of historically conditioned particularity, and an apolitical set of concerns, and the works’ philosophical merit consists in their account of the latter.<sup>36</sup>

While Newey, drawing on Machiavelli, characterises “politics” as “force, contingency and mutability”,<sup>37</sup> he also notes that contingency is used by contemporary philosophers to mark a boundary between politics and ethics:

While there are certainly major differences between the political circumstances of sixteenth-century Florence and the modern world, the relapse into normative theorising may be explained not by the thought that Machiavelli’s view of politics is not any more applicable but that it is all too applicable. The desire to eliminate contingency from ethics is a dominant strand in much current (particularly Kantian) moral theory. In this respect real-world politics is apt to appear irrational, and requiring rational control.<sup>38</sup>

Newey’s appeal to Machiavelli raises certain questions though. An ambiguity arises from the fact that Machiavelli can be referred to as the

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36 Newey, *After Politics*, pp. 20–21.

37 Newey, *After Politics*, p. 21.

38 Newey, *After Politics*, p. 21.

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father of *non-ethical* accounts of politics as well as a political adviser who prescribes theoretical devices as to how to succeed in politics despite its contingent nature. It seems that Newey appeals to both representations, which results in differentiating two kinds of prescriptive arguments in political theory, one being strictly prescriptive and the other ethical. Machiavelli is usually considered as *the* prescriptive realist political theorist since *The Prince* is a sort of handbook for wielding political power, although this political treatise is not concerned with “ethics” *per se*, but rather, the appropriate skills for political actions in changing circumstances.

This, thus, requires differentiating prescriptive *ethical* norms from prescriptive *political* norms. Yet, in this ground, it appears clearly that both realists and moralists can be *prescriptive* in their approach to politics. One can indeed infer, from Newey’s argument, that while moralists yield *ethical* forms of prescription meant to be applied politically, realists rest on *political* forms of prescriptions – but why could *ethical* prescriptions not be *political*? The divide that Newey draws between ethics and politics lacks justification and arises from a parochial account of politics and ethics.

It may also be inferred that the opposition between *normative* and *descriptive* theories makes little sense since both moralist and realist philosophers portray “politics” from the angle that best suits their own *prescriptive* account of politics. However, *describing* politics without *prescribing norms* seems more difficult to conceive as a philosophical enterprise; it may indeed rely on a more empirical method of analysis that may not be qualified as “philosophical”, but rather, as a sort of political sociology. Yet descriptive forms of enunciation can be contained within philosophy but, in this case, they belong to an order of discourse that is instrumental to that of philosophy.

Newey’s critique is, in this respect, meta-theoretical. It can therefore hardly provide any substantive philosophical account of politics “as it is”. However, that does not prevent him from offering analyses, all of which derive from his own subjective and partisan view of the reality of politics, of “the nature of political corruption and the loss of political virtue; considerations of general questions of legitimacy, not necessarily with reference to the notion of political obligation; the problem of

dirty hands and general questions concerning the relation between ethics and politics and elsewhere; non-idealised conceptions of public discourses [...]”.<sup>39</sup> As such his alleged realistic account of politics remains on a level with other alleged realistic accounts of politics. If Newey disagrees philosophically with the liberal and ethical content of political philosophy, he may have to address his critique both philosophically and politically.

Here we touch upon the problem of the epistemology of practical knowledge. According to Kelly,<sup>40</sup> Newey draws on Oakeshott’s distinction between distinctive orders of experience,<sup>41</sup> which results in the separation of politics, as a mode of practical experience, from philosophy as reflecting on the presuppositions of practice. Political philosophy is, in this respect, a second order reflection on things political. Here again, if Newey were to provide an account of the practical reality of politics, he would have to re-consider the philosophical and epistemological nature of his enterprise. He would have to re-evaluate the paradigmatic order of classification of “practical” and “philosophical/theoretical” knowledge. In fact, the way in which this question is addressed may confuse two orders of knowledge; confusion, which according to Gunnell, results from Aristotle’s account of political science as practical knowledge:

When designating political science as practical, Aristotle did not mean that, like the knowledge and art of the statesman, it was embedded in practice – quite the opposite. Although in some sense it might be based on, or a distillation of, the practitioner’s knowledge or knowledge about *how* to do certain things and although it might have utility for practice and directed towards practice, it was distinctly still knowledge *about* politics. Yet it professed to say something authoritative – descriptive, explanatory, evaluative – with respect to politics. This entailed potentially, and perhaps necessarily, a clash of authorities – the authority of knowledge, or knowledge *about*, versus the authority of politics, or operative knowledge of *how*. It also

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39 Newey, *After Politics*, p. 34.

40 Kelly, Paul, *Liberalism* (Cambridge: Polity 2005)p. 104. Newey refutes that he developed his theory under the sway of Oakeshott though.

41 Kelly, *Liberalism*, p. 104–105.

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involved the question of how these universes of discourse were and could be related both in principle and with respect to the limitations and possibilities of specific historical instances.<sup>42</sup>

One is thus confronted by a persistent problem surrounding the nature of political knowledge *via* theory and the “existential”<sup>43</sup> relationship between political theory and politics. Realists, although they do not entirely deny that politics involves applying norms, say little about their own normative view of politics; or, when they do, they allude to it as something beyond contest, as some sort of uncontroversial factual truth – politics is about power, disagreements about the good life, disagreement about whether disagreement should be dealt with or not, and if so, how, etc. From a realist view point there are basically two options for political philosophers: that taken by moralists, who decide to prescribe remedies and devices so that the endemic disagreements and power-relations that characterise politics might, in theory, be stabilised and regulated; and that taken by realists, who prefer sticking to the “reality” of politics and, who analyse the processes and new phenomena that arise from this reality. They can, for instance, attempt to manipulate the contingent and fluctuating realm of politics and to prescribe certain methods or “techniques” in the practice of political manoeuvres.<sup>44</sup>

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42 Gunnell, John G. “Relativism, the Return of the Repressed”, *Political Theory* 21 (1993) p. 572.

43 Gunnell, “Relativism, the Return of the Repressed”, p. 563.

44 Lieberman, Robert C., (quoted by Marc Stears in “Review article: Liberalism and the Politics of Compulsion”, *British Journal of Political Science*, 37 (2007), pp. 533-553) gives an insightful prescriptive analysis of the kind of skills required to adapt political contingency from a social scientific point of view: “When stable patterns of politics clash, purposive political actors will often find themselves at an impasse, unable to proceed according to the “normal” patterns and processes that have hitherto governed their behaviour. Political ideas and interests that had formerly prevailed might no longer be able to resolve (or even paper over) clashes of ideas as before. Political actors in such circumstances will often be induced to find new ways to define and advance their aims, whether by finding a new institutional forum that is more receptive to their ideas to take advantage if new institutional opportunities. The result of these moves is not that old orders

However, this categorisation implies that realist theorists may have to turn into social scientists, or sociologists. I do not develop this subject here, although it is symptomatic of the crisis of identity in the discipline felt by certain political theorists “torn” between humanities and social sciences. So, if political realists want to remain philosophers, what can their philosophy be about? As Newey puts it: “Political philosophy seems threatened by Polandisation, menaced on one side by merely descriptive (and on some views methodologically under-powered) political science, and on the other by the theoretical apparatus offered by deontological, consequentialist, and other currently debated theory-guided conceptions of the ethical.”<sup>45</sup> In response to this, one can argue that political philosophy is descriptive *and* normative, i.e. driven by guided conceptions of the ethical and rational. The way in which Newey separates the descriptive and ethical spheres of political philosophy instantiates his tendency to eschew the political implications of political philosophy:

Philosophers have demonstrated to us the inherent ambiguity and contestability of political concepts; and, most unsurprisingly, have shown that value assumptions are contained in any attempt at descriptions of political processes. Some professional students of politics in the universities – indeed this is a malaise in the social sciences – react to such criticism from the analytical philosopher by redoubling their efforts to appear “scientific” and purely factual, to purge themselves from value assumptions, and to emasculate themselves politically.<sup>46</sup>

Yet, the contingent features of politics do not necessarily preclude realists from seeking to provide politics with normative guidance. Marc

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are jettisoned but that elements of them are recombined and reconfigured into a new set of political patterns that is recognisably new and yet retains some continuity with the old ones.” “Ideas, Institutions, and Political Order: Explaining Political Change” in *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 96, No. 4, December 2002, p. 704.

45 Newey, *After Politics*, p. 17.

46 Newey, *After Politics*, p. 151.

Stears<sup>47</sup> argues that realist positions “do not in themselves stake out an alternative normative position” for they “do not see themselves merely as ‘describing’ existing realities. Rather they understand themselves as identifying essential, underlying characteristics of the activity of politics itself”.<sup>48</sup> Stears identifies three “contrasting interpretations of the normative implications”<sup>49</sup> of realist critiques. The first includes theorists like Bonnie Honig, Chantal Mouffe and James Tully for whom “to act politically in the knowledge of disagreement and struggle is to open the possibilities of genuine free expression and, with Nietzsche, to celebrate the possibility of forging new realities through the struggle of the old ones”.<sup>50</sup> The second view, whose most recent advocate, according to Stears, is Jeremy Waldron, is probably the most entangled with *ethical* liberal norms, in particular that of “democratic pluralism”, even though Waldron’s theory seeks to remain open to disagreements and conflicts through the active practice of “voting and legislating”.<sup>51</sup> Last, the third view, drawing on Hobbes and advanced among others, by Geoffrey Hawthorn, is more pessimistic about achieving any real alternative within politics as it stands, and thus suggests maintaining “a sharp division of spheres between politics and ‘civil society’”.<sup>52</sup> Further to Stears’s analysis, I would associate this last normative interpretation with the kind of realism influenced by Geuss and which develops through various critiques of value-based normativism. This realism, as for instance currently endorsed by Newey<sup>53</sup>, Andreas Sangiovanni<sup>54</sup>, John Horton<sup>55</sup> is committed to separating ethics from normativity and justice from

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47 Stears, Marc, “Review Article: Liberalism and the Politics of Compulsion”, *British Journal of Political Science*, 37 (2007), pp. 533–553.

48 Stears, *Liberalism and the Politics of Compulsion*, p. 545.

49 Stears, *Liberalism and the Politics of Compulsion*, p. 545.

50 Stears, *Liberalism and the Politics of Compulsion*, p. 546.

51 Stears, *Liberalism and the Politics of Compulsion*, p. 547.

52 Stears, *Liberalism and the Politics of Compulsion*, p. 546.

53 Newey, “Just Politics”, *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* (2012).

54 Sangiovanni, Andrea, (2008), “Justice and the priority of politics to morality”, *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 16 (2), 137–164.

55 Horton, John, (2012) “Political Legitimacy, Justice and Consent”, *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 15 (2), 149–164.

legitimacy. These dichotomies result in their reducing political theory to an account of political normativity, whose content is largely determined by particular and local contexts. Geuss has had a great influence on this sub-strand of political realism, especially since the publication of *Philosophy and Real Politics* in which he provides an insightful analysis into the way realism contributes to thinking and writing more *realistically* about politics beyond the “Is *versus* Ought debate.” As he puts it:

There is no single canonical style of theorising about politics. One can ask any number of perfectly legitimate questions about different political phenomena, and depending on the question, different kinds of enquiry will be appropriate. Asking what the question is, and why the question is asked, is always asking a pertinent question. In some contexts, a relative distinction between “the facts” and human valuations of those facts (or “norms”) might be perfectly useful, but the division makes sense only relative to the context, and can’t be extracted from that context, promoted, and declared to have absolute standing. However, I also think that the most convincing way to make this point is not by a frontal attack on the Is/Ought distinction, which would be very tedious, given that I grant that one can make the distinction in virtually any *particular* context, as a relative distinction. The Is/Ought distinction looks overwhelmingly plausible because of the way philosophers have traditionally framed the question and assumed one would have to go about answering it.<sup>56</sup>

Geuss’s observation is particularly insightful, for he displaces the standard question about “realism” with a more subtle one about the responsiveness of theorising to the practical and contextual character of facts and norms. On this view, the possibility of being philosophically realistic about politics is to be understood not in terms of the systematic differentiation between normative and descriptive theories, but as an approach that is sensitive to understanding practical political assessment as contextually located in a particular time and place. Yet this assessment can hardly be otherwise than driven or influenced by some normative projections as there is no such thing as an “objective” account of temporal and spatial

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<sup>56</sup> Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics op. cit.*, p. 17.

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contexts. Geuss appears himself sceptical about the term “normative” and whether the latter could replace ethics – as he puts it:

[...] The idea that there was a single “thing” or phenomenon that could be designated by the single term “normativity” may be thought to represent not a mere verbal quirk, but a not-in-significant step in giving the discussion of substantive issues a particular turn or slant or structure. Perhaps then, instead of any kind of single overarching “normativity”, all there is are simply different – and possibly changing – human practices, with different goals, associated conceptions of excellence, and resultant goods; and human life consists of an art or skill in negotiating a way through, which is partly constituted by these practices, partly a matter of making use of them of other ends. What replaces ethics then is not another intellectual discipline, but forms of action, which may be skilfully or less skillfully performed.<sup>57</sup>

In the footpath of Hobbes, this form of realism circumscribes politics within the boundary of a particular and normative account of politics, encompassing notions such as legitimacy, justice, consent etc. Politics is deemed to have its own ethos and produce its own concepts, its own theoretical narratives and nomenclature. But as opposed to that of Hobbes, it conveys the view that no rational and moral theoretical device can withstand the contingent disorder of politics. “Geussean” realists thus express scepticism or pessimism about the practical relevance of the appeal to ethical and rational norms – a fact which undermines the role of political philosophy as a heuristic way of rationalising, valuing and making sense of politics: “There are no cases of political system which have not contained a tradition of political speculation. Such a tradition explains rationally why power always exists in the form of authority. Quite simply, there is always need to explain *what* we are doing, and also to provide some reasons (though they will never be conclusive) why we are doing it in a particular way. Political theory is itself political.”<sup>58</sup>

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57 Geuss, “Did Williams do Ethics?”, *Arion* 19.3 (2012), pp. 141–162.

58 Crick, Bernard, *In Defence of Politics* (London: Continuum 2011), p. 154.

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For political philosophy is meant to render the course of politics meaningful (in whichever way), it is also meant to improve the conditions by which one can understand and identify his/her political values – an essential step towards any commitment and participation to politics. Political philosophy is thus less about grasping the reality of politics (which may prove methodologically impossible) than making sense of it.

### **In defence of political philosophy against political expediency**

Political theorists cannot eschew normative projections (moral and rational) in their analysis of politics. Therefore the relevance of realism, in political theory, lies less in its critique of rationality, ethics and philosophy *per se* than in the way that rationality, ethics and philosophy address the question of contingency in politics. In the former section, I argued that the recent revival of realism had been concerned with the defence of the practical and contingent dimension of politics against blind prescriptions of normative devices. Yet, this reactive movement of contest against “moralism” is double-edged: realists surely contest the projection of rational and moral norms regardless of the local and temporal aspects of politics but they fall short in re-thinking rationality and ethics otherwise.<sup>59</sup> It results that political realism reduces rationality and ethics to be the by-products of practical, prudential and factual determinations. This form of contextual determinism, which accounts for practicality and temporal contingency as *objective* limitations of political ideals, is thus embroiled with political conservatism and relativism – forging by the same token a critique of political philosophy *tout court*. In this section, I suggest that the kind of conservative realism, which has emerged alongside the rejection of moralism, and which has developed among British political theorists, accounts for political contingency as a way of justifying political expediency.

The “events” of the last decade, in particular the invasion of Iraq, have created an escalation of interpretations, moderate or radical, some-

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59 Abin, *Rationality and morality in political theory: a paradigm shift*.

times vindictive, sometimes paranoid – all reacting in the face of the paradoxical combination of the allegedly “unforeseen” and “ineluctable”. *In specie*, the invasion of Iraq was a shock to many European citizens, in particular those whose country was involved within the coalition of military belligerents. Investigations showing evidence of the absence of traces of Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq and demonstrations of millions of European citizens in the streets of capital cities did not stop the machinery of war and terror in the skies of Baghdad. Nearly fifty years after the war in Vietnam, March 2003 has been, one more time, the arrogant demonstration that military power – *in specie* that of the United States – rules out the elegant rhetoric of diplomacy and the outraged opposition of public opinions. Further to witnessing the power of the strongest – a fact that some will find banal after all – British politics has been dragging a heavy and costly burden: that of having to comply with *public lies*<sup>60</sup>. It is as if the normative orders of law and justice had lost their grip on politics, the latter imposing its own contingent order. Of course, politics *per se* is not all about contingency – politicians and governmental representatives rule power in “governing” – but politics gives the appearance of being dominated by contingency when political representatives are not any more accountable to public wants and when they do not feel bound to legal regulations – in the case of Iraq, to the legal and normative corpus of the United Nations. In sum, political contingency expands in so far as it is conducted out of the normative space of democratic and legal accountability: when politics becomes a business of private and corporate interests. Acknowledging contingency in political theory must come along alternative ways of thinking rational and ethical norms. Withdrawing ethical and rational norms from politics of reducing them to mere instrumental and prudential motives amounts to political conservatism.

Politics is indeed about governing; and governing is about ordering<sup>61</sup>:

60 Geuss, “Blair, Rubbish, and the Demons of Noontime”, *Redescriptions, Year Book or Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory, Volume 12* (Berlin: Lit Verlag 2009).

61 As Bernard Crick puts it: “The fact of government must exist, both historically and logically, before the conditions of politics. The horse does go before the cart – even though he can never quite shake it off.” *In Defence of Politics* (London: Continuum 2011), p. 147.

rationalising and designing procedures and policies. That political realism found a new breath in Britain may stem from the way in which British politics has been developing during the last decade. After the Second World War, and during the Cold War period, Michael Oakeshott accounted for British politics in an edifying way: an aspiration for moderation and the rejection of ideologies.<sup>62</sup> In the 90', British politics was inspired by an ideal of pluralism, indebted to the Lockean tradition of tolerance – it eventually took shape as a non-constraining ideal of social inclusion through consumerism and multiculturalism; an ideal that radical political theorists such as Chantal Mouffe<sup>63</sup> or Slavoj Žižek<sup>64</sup> have since then castigated. March 2003 marked a serious rupture in the public perception of British politics as enacting the liberal tradition of diplomacy, parliamentary deliberation and reasonable compromises. In that sense the decision to invade Iraq was a significant and *special* political action, which in Geuss's terms “for better or for worse, neither simply conforms to existing rules, nor intervenes, like a qadi, to find craftsmanlike solutions to specific problems, but that changes a situation in a way that cannot be seen to be a mere instantiation of a pre-existing set of rules”<sup>65</sup>; a political action which, “creates new facts, violates, ignores, or even changes the rules.”<sup>66</sup> Most politicians saw themselves either complacent or impotent in the face of an act of war aggression in which their own nation was involved. It is as if politics had been ripped of its rational and moral standards (respect for legal regulations, priority of diplomacy over military intervention etc.); of its ideal of moderation and appeasement. British politics became *something else*: what then could be left to British political theorists?

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62 Oakeshott, Michael, *Rationalism and Politics*.

63 Mouffe, Chantal, *The Return of the Political* (London:Verso 1991).

64 Žižek, Slavoj, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, (London:Verso 2002).

65 Geuss, Raymond, *Politics and The Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2010), p. 41.

66 Geuss, *Politics and The Imagination*, p. 41.

### Conclusion

The representation of politics in theory is unavoidably imbued with a view of what politics is about. Some realists contest the place of ethics within political theory and suggest instead another normative view of politics, which gives more importance to contingency. But this view cannot be identified with “realism” as a whole, for there is clear difference between Hobbesian and Machiavellian traditions of political philosophy. In that sense, the paradigm of time and contingency renders the whole concept of “realism” inconsistent as an autonomous normative category. Moreover, “realist” accounts of politics are no more objective or realistic than “moralist” ones. A distinctive feature of “realism” insists upon the autonomy of politics, but this leads to problems: for if politics is autonomous, it cannot be represented in political theory. Realist theorists can never be entirely faithful to politics if the latter is conceived as external to theory in the first place. How therefore can one apprehend the subject matter of political theory without creating what Gunnell identified with a “clash of authorities”<sup>67</sup> between the authority of politics and that of knowledge about politics? Attempts to recognise the externality or “autonomy” of politics include for instance: Aristotle’s depiction of politics as a social organisation that develops through an evolutionary scale of institutions and regimes; Hobbes’s depiction of politics as the state’s sovereign and contractual protection of the individual’s life within community; Schmitt’s depiction of politics as a theological mission entailing wars and endemic conflicts etc. The “autonomy” of politics is thus represented artificially within political theory. It is precisely within these representations that there resides the ineradicable normative *and* political function of political theory, i.e. through its capacity to impart a persuasive representation of politics as being “politics”. The normative function of this representation also resides in the way it articulates the nature of politics and that of human reason. Most contemporary political theorists, who claim to hold a “realistic” view of politics, identify and acknowledge this externality in terms of contingency, temporality and practicality. This depiction of politics has consequence on the way in which political philosophy is thought in relation

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67 Gunnell, “Relativism, the Return of the Repressed”, p. 572.

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to politics. In accounting for politics in terms of practicality, temporality and contingency, some realists castigate ethical and ideal-based designs for being irrelevant to politics. However, theorising the practical, temporal and contingent aspects of politics is already rationally and ethically involved. In detaching ethical or ideal-based values from political norms, realism finds itself in a peculiar situation, for it remains bound to normative and prescriptive implications while emphasising that politics is contingent and autonomous; a peculiarity conducive to yielding ideas that Bernard Crick compared to “disguised doctrines”<sup>68</sup>.

Political philosophy is thus a necessary tool to design partisan claims and render visible, because intelligible, the way in which authority and power are wielded.

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68 Crick, *In Defence of Politics*, p 160.