



# From Professionalisation and Normalisation to Genealogy and Realism: The Challenge of Liberalism in Contemporary Political Theory

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## Abstract

This essay seeks to characterise and explain a specific pattern in professional political theorising over the last five decades. The paper does not seek to offer a stipulative or philosophical definition of the activity and nor can it offer a full historical or political sociological analysis of the activity in the context of academic institutions in the Anglophone world. Instead it provides a high-level overview of a particular pattern of development in the activity of political theory as exemplified in core outputs such as monographs, journal articles and essays as a way of explicating some perennial dynamics in the discipline that could be given a more extended historical and sociological explanation. That pattern is illustrated in the initial quest for professionalisation and institutional normalisation which has a tendency towards presenting the subject of study as converging on a broadly liberal agenda. This dominant liberal paradigm in turn has been challenged by the recent development of genealogical analyses of the contemporary intellectual history of political theory and the rise of political realism as attempts to sustain a common subject of enquiry that does not collapse into the endorsement of a liberal vision of ‘the political’. This dialectic, which centres on the problem of liberalism, is the key to understanding the fundamental dynamic of Anglophone political theory as an institutional practice as well as a body of ideas, principles and values.

**Keywords** Professionalisation · Genealogy · Realism · Political theory · Intellectual history · Cosmopolitanism · Liberalism · Contextualism

Political theorists can appear obsessively focused on the nature and value of their activity especially when contrasted with political scientists (Floyd 2019; Kelly, 1998, 2011). The latter might spend a considerable time on methodological questions but when it comes to the subject of their study there is broad agreement. For political theory the puzzlement covers not only the issue of theory; what is it?, how should theorising be done?, but this puzzlement also extends to the nature of ‘the political’ itself. With its practical convergence on the small body of rigorous and respectable methodologies in its toolbox, political science can turn its attention to whatever sites of activity, institutions and behaviour can be characterised as political. Yet ‘the political’, that curious adjectival noun that

has become so ubiquitous in our discourse, is one of the central challenges facing political theorists and one of the greatest sources of contention amongst them. As there is no settled account of ‘the political’ and consequently no single or authoritative approach to addressing it, political theory is marked precisely by its lack of a stable subject of enquiry and a common method or set of methods for its analysis, explanation and defence. Indeed, it is precisely this absence of a certain and stable core that is essential to the survival of the subject or practice. It may seem paradoxical, but it is nevertheless true that it is precisely the absence of an agreed subject of enquiry and consequent methodology that has sustained the position of political theory in the study and practice of political science (I shall be using the terms political theory and political philosophy interchangeably throughout this essay especially where authors self-identify as one or the other, but who are for my purposes engaged in the same activity).

This general point about the fundamental contestability of the activity and subject of enquiry that comprises political

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theory, explains the preoccupation of political theorists with the nature of their activity, but it also makes it difficult to make broad and incontestable claims about that activity of the sort I entertain in this essay which sets out to characterise contemporary political theory. This essay does not make conceptual and philosophical claims that distinguish or determine the scope and agenda of the enquiry. Furthermore, it does not make any claims that turn on a conceptual or philosophical distinction between political theory and political philosophy. Whilst there are ways of distinguishing these things, they do not establish a set of rigorous or categorical distinctions between theory and the philosophy of the political. Political theorists tend to pursue political philosophy in political science departments and vice versa. Disciplinary history has more authority in characterising the practice of political theory, but even here the distinction is not straightforward or uncontested.

My argument will be neither a philosophical enquiry nor a disciplinary history but the reflections of an engaged practitioner from within an activity that has been the context of a long academic career. This might seem a dangerously autobiographical approach, of interest to those who might know the author, but of no more general interest. I am clearly conscious that what interests me may be of little or no interest to anyone else but acknowledging that still leaves open the painful challenge of Nietzsche, that there is always something irreducibly first personal about all academic enquiries in philosophy and the humanities — they are just another manifestation of the will to power (Nietzsche 1994). This fact is further illustrated by recent books on Berlin (Cherniss 2013 & 2021 and Lyons 2020) or Rawls (Forrester, 2019) as well as studies that bring questions of the fundamental character of political theory back to the critical exposition of key figures in the contemporary development of the institutional practice (Hall 2020).

Amongst the most significant of these studies is Katerina Forrester's *In The Shadow of Justice: Postwar Liberalism and the Remaking of Political Philosophy* (2018) which will be the background to the arguments of this essay. Her book is especially important as it offers a critical genealogy of the practice of political philosophy (theory) since the late 1960s and its convergence around a group of central texts, the most important of which is John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* (Rawls 1971). My argument in this essay will tell another version of the same story or genealogy, one which focuses on ways in which political theorists have sought to reject this convergence on Rawls as a strategy of normalisation. Just as Forrester saw the convergence on Rawls as a problem that reinforced the dominance of a type of liberalism within the conception of the political, I will also acknowledge the normalisation of Rawlsian type theory as one part of a dialectic that struggles with the liberal character of the subject of political theory. Yet I will also claim that the most recent

interesting trends in political theory are concerned with transcending that liberal perspective. My conclusion is that these attempts to think beyond the boundaries of a liberal vision of 'the political' nevertheless renew political theory and the motive to continue the mode of enquiry at the heart of the practice of political theory. The owl of Minerva is not flapping her wings and we are nowhere near the end of the day.

## Professionalisation and Normalisation in the Practice of Political Theory

In a polemically robust essay 'Political Theory, Old and New', which concluded a section of *A New Handbook of Political Science* (Barry 1996) and discussed work by Iris Marion Young (Young 1996) and Bhikhu Parekh, (Parekh 1996), Brian Barry defended the importance of the model of liberal political theory that had been exemplified by Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* (Rawls 1971) and the work of his followers, amongst whom Barry included himself. Barry was responding to Young's claim that Rawls had made an important contribution to the recovery of political theory but that his preoccupations were too narrow and needed to be considerably expanded by adding new questions and approaches. Parekh's argument was more critical of Rawls and his legacy, and paid particular criticism of the idea that political theory had been resurrected by Rawls after falling into decline following the impact of the spread of logical positivism and Oxford ordinary language philosophy in the 1940s and 1950s. Contrary to the claim of Peter Laslett (Laslett 1956), that political theory had become moribund in the 1950s, Parekh argued that major contributions to political thought were made by Arendt and Oakeshott (on whom Parekh was an expert scholar) but also Popper, Berlin, Hayek, Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, Sartre, Habermas and Marcuse amongst others. He describes each of these thinkers as gurus who 'had ... followers ... and established a distinct school whose members sympathetically developed the master's thought' but rarely engaged directly with each other. (Parekh 1996: p. 505). Parekh was trained in India as an undergraduate and then at the LSE of Michael Oakeshott in the early 1960s so was never an 'Oxford type' political theorist of the sort that saw political theory as the application of moral principles and a branch of applied ethics as Berlin, H.L.A. Hart or Barry himself had. He was also more sensitive as an outsider to cultural difference and the tendency of Western thought to claim a false universality of scope and significance. He would later become one of the most important theorists of multiculturalism.

Parekh's celebration of pluralism, multiculturalism and diversity was one of major targets of Barry in his essay. But against Parekh's sensitivity to diversity and pluralism, Barry asserts the importance of coherence, uniformity and what is

best characterised as professionalisation. After a period as a stellar but caustic student at Oxford in the late 1950s, Barry fell under the influence of the legal philosopher H.L.A. Hart, and through him John Rawls, who was already a significant philosopher working on justice, albeit before the publication of his seminal work in 1971. Barry wrote his own D.Phil as an attempt to provide order and coherence in a theoretically rigorous study of politics that could dispense with the tyranny of utilitarianism, the only popular political philosophy that had withstood the onslaught of logical positivism (Barry 1965). Yet when he first went to Harvard as a post-doctoral student the biggest impact on him was political science and positive theory, especially what would later become known as rational choice and game theory inspired by the work of Kenneth Arrow, Anthony Downs and others. This influence is reflected in another of his early books devoted to the theory of democracy, *Sociologists, Economists and Democracy* (Barry 1970).

From this experience Barry developed a career as both a positive political scientist as well as one of the most important British political theorists. His career was not only as an author of major books but also as the leading advocate of the professionalisation of political theory and the political science profession in the United Kingdom. As well as holding prestigious academic appointments, he edited and co-founded journals and promoted the idea of a single academically rigorous discipline that challenged the pluralistically self-consciously, unsystematic approach he found in many departments, research councils and in the British Political Studies Association (Grant 2010).

Barry argued that the problem with Parekh's gurus was that one could either accept or reject their insights, but one could not engage with their claims in terms of testing their truth or justification. Nor, he claimed, could one draw practical inferences from them which could inform political science and public policy. According to Barry, the crucial difference with Rawls is that his theory provoked many questions about the scope and application of political theory, and it addressed the fundamental question about the nature of the political by linking it to the idea of what makes a well-ordered political society. Rawls conception of a well-ordered society was not identical to the idea of the state, but it was close enough for his ideas to be applied to the real world of states with which most political scientists were familiar. Barry was no uncritical follower of Rawls and departed from him in significant ways, but he accepted Rawls idea of the basic structure as the central problem of political theory.

Another non-trivial consequence of the centrality of *A Theory of Justice* was that political theory developed a core literature and classic texts which formed part of a systematic education in political theory as part of political science. By defining a or *the* core problem of political theory as concerned with how social justice emerges out of co-operation amongst free and equal people, students and teachers were oriented

around a common literature, specific set of questions and methods for advancing their studies.<sup>1</sup> The idea of a mode of enquiry that allowed progress and the advancing of debates, if not the solution to problems, was central to the claim of political theory being a credible bedfellow of political science. This was especially important as the development of intellectual history amongst a group of scholars associated with Cambridge University was detaching the study of political thought from political theory and replacing it with a methodologically robust historical mode of enquiry (Whatmore 2021 and Kelly 1998). Political thought and ideas were for historians and not political scientists or political philosophers. The advantage of Rawls over, for example, Plato, Hobbes and Locke was that no one could deny the serious study of his ideas from the perspective of contemporary political theory on the grounds of a category error, as Rawls was not (at least then) a historical figure but was actively involved in refining his own theory in response to the predicament and preoccupations of the present world (Rawls 1993 & 1999).

What underpins Barry's response to Young and Parekh is the idea of a model of political theory that matches Thomas Kuhn's conception of normal as opposed to revolutionary science. For Kuhn, revolutionary science involves major paradigm shifts which transform practice and open up new problems like those exemplified by the theories of Copernicus, Newton and Einstein. Normal science presupposes the validity and stability of a paradigm and is primarily concerned with problem solving within a conceptual scheme as well as exploring new or familiar questions in light of the reigning scientific paradigm (Kuhn 1962). Barry does not go so far as to suggest that Rawls is a Kuhnian revolutionary. However, he does see the post-Rawlsian world as a sphere of normalisation with not just a settled view of core questions such as the nature of a well-ordered society, but the sociological and institutional practices that go with normal science such as graduate education, the professionalisation of faculty, the growth of new journals and institutionally recognised ways of carrying on the discipline such as academic conferences.

Whilst recent studies of post Rawlsian political theory have focused on the ways in which Rawls dominated the range of acceptable questions and approaches (Young 1996 & Forrester, 2019), an often overlooked issue is precisely this matter of the way in which his work was used to establish and reinforce disciplinary normalisation. His impact on what was taught and how, was much greater than his impact on the journal literature, which is the primary focus of Forrester's study. This of course does not mean that Rawls was taught as the only truth. In fact the teaching of Rawls was often as much 'and his critics and by his critics' as it was about shaping

<sup>1</sup> Although Barry professed indifference to the history of political thought, he was extraordinarily knowledgeable and could quote extensively from Hume and Hobbes.

a generation of orthodox Rawlsites. Books such as *Liberals and Communitarians* (Mulhall and Swift 1996) and *Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Kymlicka 1990) which begin with Rawls and then proceed to his critics, became standard texts used in undergraduate and graduate education, whichever side of the debate the teacher was on. The ready availability of such texts enabled the extension of political theory into the centre of political education such that whatever else students knew about political theory they knew something about Rawls and his methods and substantive problems. My point is not that Rawls was always the subject of enquiry — that is clearly not the case — but the way in which political theory was interpreted, taught and conducted was largely transformed by the institutionalisation of a discursive practice that Rawls' work made possible and to which his work was central.

### Genealogies of Political Theory and the Concept of the Political

The centrality and challenge of the Rawls' inspired paradigm can be seen in the way in which it became difficult to avoid being drawn into its orbit. Much political theory in the late 1980s and early 1990s was preoccupied with early and later Rawls, whether this came from libertarian critics such as Nozick (Nozick 1974) or communitarians (Sandel 1982 & Walzer 1983). And of course, there were attempts to refine and defend the Rawlsian project (Kelly 2005). But there remained a problem for those who sought to think beyond Rawlsianism. The attempt to shift focus to 'domination' over distribution by Young and others required the reference to the still dominant distributive paradigm as the point of contrast and therefore engagement with the Rawlsian model of politics (Young 1996).

Equally, the adequacy of that radical shift was challenged by those, like Barry, who claimed that Young presupposed elements of the distributive paradigm, such as the distribution of rights and liberties as a necessary part of the response to domination. The problem for the distributive paradigm, and for radical theorists trying to displace it, was that it was irremediably liberal in that it centred and privileged a conception of the subject as a free and equal agent confronting a distributive agency or juridical state. The fundamental commitment to the claims of free and equal moral subjects in the face of state power always seemed to beg the question in favour of liberal arguments and values.

Of course, liberalism is a broad and diverse family of theories and commitments. It can range from anti-state neoliberals such as Hayek with their emphasis on spontaneous order and the primacy of market solutions to social and economic questions; libertarians such as Nozick who see the sole role for a state as the coercive guarantor of individuals in the

enjoyment of their rights, as well as interventionist egalitarians such as Rawls and Barry with their commitment to economic redistribution of wealth as a condition of the equal status of free individuals (Kelly 2005). All this to say nothing of real world liberal political parties with ideological agendas from the left to the right of the political spectrum. Liberalism is one of the most contested political terms, yet it remains a ubiquitous and seemingly ineradicable concept in contemporary political theory. Once the claims of individuals are asserted, then the ethical individualism that underpins Rawlsian type arguments seems to exhaust the terrain of argument. All claims to group rights or the social bases of individual identity are constantly held to account at the bar of individual rights as is seen in the seemingly interminable debates between liberals and multiculturalists, where multiculturalism was considered legitimate only in so far as it was consistent with liberal ideas (Kymlicka 1995 & Parekh 2000).

Of course, many who engaged in these debates, such as Barry, did not attach much weight to this charge of liberalism and often saw themselves as thinkers of the left or socialists of various kinds. But the ideological commitment was not the most important element of the charge of ubiquitous liberalism. The real issue was that the basic interpretive architecture of the political was shaped by individuals as rights bearing entities confronting juridical power structures such as states. Technically, Rawls focused on the idea of the 'Basic structure' of society which included all the institutions that shaped the nature of individuals ethical and political status, but all the elements of a 'Basic structure' nevertheless fell within the orbit of a juridical state (Rawls 1971: 6–10). States would do the redistributing to correct inequalities of power and right, and it was to states that the claims for recognition and accommodation were addressed.

Marxists and feminists could enter political theory debates but in so doing their fundamental conceptions of the locus and nature of political action, agency and power were inevitably transformed into or rather subordinated to liberal assumptions and norms. Of course, this was one of the virtues of the professionalisation that Barry and others had sought, but it was bought at the price of taking a side in a far more fundamental debate about the nature of the political: must this always revolve around the state and the individual as a rights bearer? If not, how can we conceive of a conception of the political that does not abandon the important ethical dimensions of liberal individualism? One very new and competing answer was proposed by the cosmopolitan turn in international political theory.

When political theory turned its attention to international distributive justice, it collided with the concept of the nation state and state power, which as we have seen was always lurking below the surface of the Rawlsian conception of the political. Global justice rendered that 'statism' explicit. This was no more starkly illustrated than in the debates around



extending Rawls' two principles of justice into the international realm. *A Theory of Justice* had confined the issue of justice to a closed domestic society therefore bracketing any discussion of international relations. But early enthusiasts for Rawls' view such as Charles Beitz were keen to extend the application of his theory (Beitz 1979). Beitz argued that if the world was effectively a single scheme of social cooperation, which he thought was empirically true given modern trade and technology, then the conditions for the question of global justice inevitably arose.

Thomas Pogge was more radical still, arguing that in virtue of the two moral powers of persons, namely their ability to have a conception of the good and to recognise the claims of others in a conception of right, was sufficient to extend the scope of justice universally (Pogge 1989). Rawls famously challenged these views with the publication of *The Law of Peoples*, which confined the question of distributive justice to the domestic domain and sought to address international issues between peoples with the concept of toleration as opposed to distributive justice (Rawls 1999). Although Rawls deliberately chose the term 'peoples' over that of states or nations ('peoples' can be compatible but are not identical with those concepts), his response was widely seen as a favouring of the statism of traditional international relations discourse over that of the moral demands of global justice and he received considerable criticism from erstwhile supporters such as Barry and Beitz. Peoples were not defined in terms of institutions and territory but following in the line of Rousseau and Kant the idea of a people was a juridical notion with universal application (Kelly 2022).

In contrast to Rawls' immanent statism, many of his followers developed the approach of Pogge and separated his ethical individualism from his focus on peoples. This became the cosmopolitan turn that was to be important in political theory, although not in international theory, as theorists developed accounts of international justice and just war theory that denied the ethical significance of political associations (Caney 2005 and Fabre 2012). This cosmopolitan discomfort with the immanent statism of liberal political theory was given a political boost following the financial crisis of 2008 and the unleashing of migration into Europe after the war in Syria. Migration was not only a huge humanitarian catastrophe that raised questions about global economic redistribution, but it also exposed the problem of the relationship between states and individuals as rights bearers. To whom do migrants address their claims of right and what are the rights of those outside a scheme of social cooperation to membership of a rights conferring association? As Hannah Arendt had argued a generation before, drawing on her personal experience, the situation of the migrant challenges the adequacy of the discourse of state and rights, an issue that is overlooked in Rawls' *The Law of Peoples*.

The implicit assumptions underlying professional unity and normalisation of political theory was not destroyed by the cosmopolitan turn, as once again the paradoxical difficulty of breaking out of the terms of this discourse reinforced by the arguments over the coherence of cosmopolitanism in the face of a world of state power reasserted itself. But the experience of the migrant crisis brought to the fore the deep and unmistakable limitations of actual liberal democracies in addressing the claims of stateless peoples and this exacerbated the reaction against the partiality of the liberal assumptions that underpinned orthodox analytical political theory (Owen 2020).

The challenge for political theory remains the liberal conception of the political that undergirds its core problematic. As we have seen this has led some to address the problem by rejecting the conception of the political but with the constant tendency to be sucked back into a broadly liberal debate where the juridical individual and the state are central. The cosmopolitan turn had sought to separate the two dimensions and salvage the notion of the individual but problematise that of the state, whereas its primary opponent, liberal nationalism, sought to salvage the identity conferring community at the expense of the overt priority of individuals as bearers of liberal rights. These debates and sub-traditions continue to battle it out in the academic journal literature alongside those who continue to provide ever more technically sophisticated claims about the nature and scope of questions of justice — all of which continue to presume a good, namely justice and a justice giver, with some state-like powers even when this is reframed and reconstituted as a cosmopolitan global sovereign.

Yet the Rawlsian normalisation of political theory has recently undergone a major and radical challenge from a parallel but separate discourse, namely intellectual history. Intellectual history has always been part of the study of politics since it became a separate subject of study in the late nineteenth century. However, the drive for professionalisation in political theory in the last five decades was accompanied by a similar tendency in intellectual history with the history of political ideas becoming a distinct activity under the influence of Cambridge historians such as Skinner, Dunn and Pocock (Whatmore 2021 & Kelly 1998). Although Pocock and Skinner have sought to challenge the inevitability of political discourse by exposing its particular and contingent roots in the early modern period, both Pocock and Skinner have nevertheless been focused on the rise of the modern state and its associated discourses of freedom and order. Both Skinner and Pocock were particularly interested in the ways in which a republican discourse of liberty developed alongside theories of sovereign power. Skinner's neo-Roman theory of freedom was seen as an alternative to the Berlinian model of two concepts of liberty that was too heavily influenced by Cold-War ideological struggles (Skinner 1998 & Cherniss 2021). However, it was also seen by some historians as an

engagement in political theory that violated the strictures of his early methodological writings against ‘prolepsis’, the tendency to see earlier debates and arguments as prefiguring present political controversies. Although these intellectual historians did much to challenge the political order that underpinned normative political theory by showing how it was fundamentally contingent, they nevertheless also seemed to reinforce its conception of the political through their unintentional statism.<sup>2</sup>

Yet the methodological revolution Skinner and Pocock helped unleash, also resulted in a turn from an archaeological approach to intellectual history which uncovers the hidden layers of our present conceptual discourses, and towards a more overtly genealogical approach to the context of our political language (Floyd & Stears 2011). The concept of genealogy was originally developed by Nietzsche, and to some extent Foucault in his later works, as an engaged critical account of the origins of our political discourses. The point is not only to show their contingency as opposed to their philosophical necessity, but to do that in a way that exposes the political strategies of exclusion and suppression that are involved in the emergence of political languages. This involved combining a focus on an author’s context with a similar focus on the intentions, context and presuppositions of the enquirers who are partly constituting those contexts of discourse. Not only are our political and moral languages contingent but they are the consequences of histories of domination and power struggles which are reinforced by politics, historiography and philosophy. Contrary to the claims of Marxist theories of ideology, these struggles are not simply between ruler and exploited in terms of Marx’s historical materialism all prefiguring class struggle, but in more insidious ways and offering less by way of emancipation through their identification.

Nietzschean genealogy is important as it exposed the language of morality as a strategy of control and domination and thus unsettles or even denies the possibility of appealing to morality and ethics as the basis of disciplining political power. The Rawlsian model of the political, whether that be the distributive paradigm, or the idea of the individual moral subject, assumes a core ethical idea that is regarded as the standard against which political power must be held to account. This idea of the individual moral subject might seem an inescapable intuition that we cannot challenge without losing everything, but it is precisely this assumption that the genealogical turn undermines. It encourages us to attempt to liberate our political imaginations from the dominance (some would say tyranny) of the Rawlsian liberal model of the political.

Many of these genealogies are the prerogative of historians of political ideas, especially following the colonial turn in political theory. Rather than mining the history of political thought for legacy stories in Locke, Kant or Mill, there have been interesting and challenging historical studies that link these ‘liberal saints’ to the legacy of colonial exploitation through their engagement with racism, the justification of colonialism and the implicit or overt accommodation of chattel slavery. As liberal theorists criticised socialists in the Cold War as guilty by association with the gulags, show trials and mass killings of Stalin and Mao, so many radicals have been only too happy to return in kind the challenge that ‘liberalism’ and its most prominent thinkers were associated with colonial domination, imperialism and racism with all their attendant slaughter (Losurdo 2005).

Of course, showing that there are ambiguities or even appalling lapses in the heroes of liberalism does not invalidate claims about liberal arguments. Kant’s conception of right is not strictly invalidated by his views on race. That said, the significance of these thinkers to the origin stories of contemporary liberal theory and its conception of the political, does have a bearing on the persuasiveness of that moral order as shown with devastating effect by one of the most nuanced philosophical critics of liberal theory’s blindness to racial identity and exploitation (Mills, 1997, 2017).

Others, such as Raymond Geuss, have been more willing to denounce the whole practice of liberal political theory for its reliance on figures such as Kant (Geuss, 2005, 2008). Geuss takes a strongly Nietzschean line against the Kantian moral underpinnings of contemporary political theory and Rawls in particular, with his assault on the ugly protestant pietism that underpinned Kant’s ethical views — at least according to Geuss! All moral concepts are merely the consequences of the triumph of previous political struggles and usually religious political struggles as opposed to being the undiluted outcome of the dictates of reason and truth. There is no moral truth, just regimes of power. Some may be better regimes of power than others, but they are what they are and the idea that one moral conceptual scheme embodies a truth is merely a form of intellectual and political self-deception.

Not all genealogies are as stridently opposed to contemporary political theory as Geuss’s. Nevertheless, the strategy has brought intellectual history back into direct contact with political theory and no more so than in attempts to break out of the Rawlsian conception of the political. In a series of books, Samuel Moyn has sought to show how recent the ubiquitous discourse of human rights is and how surprising are its sources. The more subtle account of the emergence of human rights discourse from twentieth century political theology with its defence of human dignity in the face of totalitarianism links this apparently liberal and modern conception with a surprising set of contexts in early twentieth century Catholic thought (Moyn, 2010, 2015). For some, though this is not Moyn’s intention, the guilt by association with otherwise discredited

<sup>2</sup> This is something that Pocock seems to have acknowledged in his recent multi volume study of the context of Edward Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, as he moves into a form of global intellectual history (Whatmore 2016).

or contentious moral visions damages the status of liberalism as morally and politically unassailable. For others these stories assist with the task of opening the moral and political imagination necessary to think beyond the Rawlsian basic structure as the only viable conception of the political by showing that they are by no means inevitable or of long standing.

Katerina Forrester's highly praised *In The Shadow of Justice* has provided a nuanced and carefully reconstructed account of how Rawls came to dominate Anglo-American political philosophy for nearly fifty years. Whilst she carefully reconstructs the intellectual contexts in which Rawlsian liberalism came to dominate, she is sensitive to the alternative pathways that were not chosen and the political consequences of those choices. Much of Rawls' success is attributed to the political context in which a generation of philosophers, especially in the U.S., confronted a world shaped by the struggle for Civil Rights and against the War in Vietnam, but also to the institutional context, with the founding of new journals and the expansion of higher education. Yet the triumph of the Rawlsian conception of the political was a by no means inevitable and nor was its institutionalisation required to take the form it did to the exclusion of other voices which were developing elsewhere in the academy, albeit at some distance from the attention of analytic philosophers. Forrester concludes with a recognition of the contingency of a practice and a model of politics but also a recognition that the colonisation of political theory by a legal-philosophical discourse has precluded the opportunity for other ways of conceiving of the political. Although she avoids an overtly pessimistic conclusion, she does suggest that the challenge to the future of political theory probably comes from outside of its basic assumptions and terms of reference. And that means looking outside of the existing disciplines of political science and political philosophy. As political theory as a form of moral enquiry, to use Alasdair MacIntyre's early modern terminology, has always been eclectic, it is perhaps no surprise that political theory might need to look to new disciplines across the social sciences or new conceptions of the practice of philosophical criticism to renew itself. The recent work of Amia Srinivasan is a good example of what an alternative form of political theory can take (Srinivasan 2021). Intellectual history and the new Global history will no doubt play a part in that endeavour (Moyn and Sartori 2013). That said, one other consequence of the genealogical turn has been to refocus the attention of some scholars on what has become known as political realism.

### The Rise of Realism and the Persistence of the Liberal Conception of the Political

As indicated above, political realism is one of the most discussed challenges to the Rawlsian conception of the political that has informed the normalisation of political theory. It is associated with, and has benefitted from, genealogical critiques of the practice of political theory, especially in the

hands of one of its most prominent theorists, Raymond Geuss (Geuss, 2008, 2020). Its most important element is the refusal to make the conception of the political subordinate to the claims of morality and however much political realists differ, and they differ in significant ways, they all reject the foundational role of ethics in political theory (Sleat 2018).

The realist rejection of the primacy of the ethical, and its concomitant claim about justice as the first virtue of social institutions, was central to the arguments of Bernard Williams who sought to shift attention from the idea of justification to legitimacy and legitimation as the first political question, (Williams 2005). Williams's philosophical reputation was partly shaped by his sceptical assault on contemporary ethical theories, in particular Kantian deontological ethics as well as utilitarianism. Underlying his philosophical criticisms was his challenge to the idea of the moral system as a body of rights, duties and rules, which he, following Elizabeth Anscombe, saw as the moribund legacy of a no longer accepted Christian natural law theory. Ethical thought, if it was to have any purpose, needed to be liberated from this drive to systematisation and was instead best seen as a first person attempt to make sense of oneself in a world of others. But if ethics was not the source of a system, then the idea of morality as a rule-governed practice collapsed as the framework for politics and the primacy of justice.

Williams's main writings on political theory were published posthumously and he did not live to work out the details of a political theory that eschewed appeals to the primacy of ethics and moral principle, but his assertion of the importance of the basic legitimation demand has become the starting point of many political theorists who have sought to develop non-ethical political theories (Williams 2005; Hall 2020). The realism of political realists is best contrasted with idealism and moralism, as opposed to statism and positivism, as in the case of realism in international relations. It involves the rejection of the primacy of conceptions of morality and ethics as normatively prior to the normativity internal to the practice of political action. Of course, this raises important questions about the possible ways of conceiving of political action independently of morality and the canon of political theory offers many candidate examples of thinkers who assert the priority of the political over the ethical from Thucydides, through Machiavelli to Lenin and Schmitt in the twentieth century (Kelly 2022).

Some political realists such as Geuss bask in the rejection of liberalism but do not give a clear account of the boundaries of politics (Geuss 2008, 2020). References to Lenin as a possible guide are at best performative and at worst disingenuous (Geuss 2008). Others have sought to temper this radical realist turn by seeking to show how a more modest liberal view can be constructed from within an account of the conditions of political action (Sleat, 2013, 2016). Others such as Mark Philp and John McCormick (Philp 2007 McCormick 2011) look to Machiavelli and the republican tradition of popular

self-rule as the basis for a non-liberal account of political normativity. Yet it is not obvious that this realist turn is inimical to retaining a commitment to the centrality of a liberal conception of the political, albeit that it means that justice is no longer the first virtue of political institutions. Whilst political theory might need to retreat from a narrow focus on the principles of justice that apply to the basic structure of political societies, the persistence of a broadly liberal conception of the political which asserts the importance of individuals in the face of political power is by no means redundant.

It is too early to come to a final judgement as to whether the realist turn succeeds in displacing the primacy of a liberal conception of the political as the unifying problem of political theory or whether it simply joins the list of challengers to its dominance. Realism certainly checks the ambitions of cosmopolitanism to liberate an ethical approach to politics from the constraints of real-world politics. Yet it leaves open the question of the form of the political that underpins its own activity. It could seek to treat the conception of the political as a matter of salience, where the conditions of real world, political organisation set the problems that political theory must address. In the face of the genealogical critique, this is a claim that many political liberals would claim; indeed it is arguably the view of Barry in his 1996 essay discussed above.

In a world that is still largely statist, many of the fundamental problems of politics will be shaped by that model of political association however much radical theorists might criticise the priority of a statist perspective. All the realist need do is avoid the utopian tendency to reify that conception of the political in terms of an ideal or just state. But at the same time, the realist will also face the constant challenge from liberal theorists who criticise the danger of conservatism and the acceptance of the status quo as normatively valid. The centrality of a liberal conception of the political might well be contingent from the point of view of history, but it is no less compelling for all that, given the world in which political theory is conducted. In this case, the political realists and the political liberals are likely to converge on a common set of problems, albeit one that prompts them to come up with very different solutions. Given the salience of the state and the claims of citizens and individual non-citizens, the conception of the political remains broadly the same, even if the things we say about it and the priority we give to the problems that arise from it continue to change.

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