Review

Value, Conflict, and Order: Berlin, Hampshire, Williams, and the Realist Revival in Political Theory

Edward Hall

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In her back-cover endorsement of *Value, Conflict, and Order*, Alison McQueen writes that ‘political realism has produced a sharp methodological critique of “ethics-first” theorizing. But that is all this revival has produced so far’. The main virtue of Edward Hall’s book, according to her, is that it offers ‘a substantive alternative to the moralisms it criticizes’. I certainly agree with McQueen’s praise that Hall has written a terrific book on the realist revival in political theory, one that will establish him as one of the leading ‘new political realists’. It is, quite simply Hall’s analytical brilliance, paired with admirable lucidity and creativity, that allows him to develop critical – but remarkably fair – accounts of Berlin, Hampshire, and Williams, and, ultimately, to make a major contribution to the realist revival in political theory. At the same time, though, it is difficult to see how Hall allows us to conceive of political realism as more than a methodological approach; this is a more critical point to which I will return at the end of this review.

Hall starts off by sketching out the main tenets of the realist approach. Realists reject a particular style of theorising, a style they dub ‘moralism’, ‘idealism’, or, perhaps most pointedly, the ‘ethics-first’ approach. For moralists such as Rawls, Nozick, Cohen, or Dworkin, politics is a ‘mere arena for applying a set of prior moral values and principles. That political philosophy is not just an especially important form of applied moral standard is the leitmotif of recent realist theorizing’ (p. 1). But Hall is anxious to avoid a potential (and not uncommon) misunderstanding: Most realists do not draw a strict line of separation between ethics and politics, let alone do they reject ethics *tout court*. Political realism, rather,

is grounded in a rejection of moral theory as standardly conceived and emerges from the adoption of a realistic spirit in ethics that problematizes

traditional accounts of morality, as well as the assumed view of the relationship between morality and politics that such accounts explicitly or implicitly endorse (p. 3).

Realism, therefore, is as much about ethics as it is about politics; what realists insist on, in fact, is that this relationship is inherently complex and that one cannot simplistically be treated as the handmaiden of the other.

For Hall, then, realism is based on several closely intertwined ‘correctives to the moralistic character of contemporary political theory’ (pp. 9–11). Most importantly, realists reject the idea that politics is a form of ‘applied ethics’ and emphasise the distinctiveness of politics as a separate domain of action. Second, realists are critical of the idealised and optimistic accounts of morality that permeate contemporary political philosophy. Third, realists stress the conflictual nature of politics and think it is utopian at best and dangerous at worst to believe that conflict and disagreement can be overcome; fourth, realists take seriously the ‘priority of order’ in political life. And finally, realists aver that the correct starting point for theorising is the historical and political reality of how human beings are likely to act in institutional settings. All these points come together in an idea that lies at the heart of what Hall rightly calls the realist ‘sensibility’ (p. 13): Thinking about politics must not start with principles that lie ‘outside’ the realm of politics since these principles (and values) are created and constantly re-created through political engagement, friction, and conflict. These principles, in other words, arise out of politics and cannot be imposed on it from outside.

Hall, obviously, diagnoses this realist sensibility in the writings of ‘the Oxford pessimists’ (p. 5) – Isaiah Berlin, Stuart Hampshire, and Bernard Williams. While these three philosophers are not, as Hall rightly reminds us, archetypal realists, their philosophies nonetheless revolve around concepts such as order, conflict, legitimacy, tragedy, power, coercion, and compromise. Berlin, for instance, is portrayed as an atypical realist who shares common ground with moralists; yet it is his ‘master idea’ of value pluralism that pushes his thought in a realist direction. This value pluralism – the idea that fundamental values can conflict and are often incommensurable – brings to the fore a number of concepts (the tragedy of the human condition, the necessity of political judgement, negative freedom, the impurity of political theory) that

compromises a claim at the heart of Rawlsian, and much post-Rawlsian, political philosophy: that the first task of political theory is to articulate an ideal theory of political society before asking secondarily how our political institutions should be ordered, or political agents should act, in reference to this ideal. (p. 46)

To be clear, though, the point of Berlin’s value pluralism is *not* that we do not need normative values to guide our judgement; it is, rather, that we must jettison the

dangerous illusion of one ‘supreme value’ that will guide our judgement in each and every individual case.

An idea of value pluralism also underlies Hampshire’s thought. But here again Hall demonstrates his characteristic analytical strength by teasing out the most profound difference between Berlin and Hampshire: While the former insists that conflict is inevitable because a plurality of valuable ways of life exists, the latter ascribes a constructive role to conflict ‘in establishing new values and commitments because we have a tendency to define ourselves in light of what we reject’ (p. 85). In short, then, for Hampshire (certain) conflicts are transformative and even desirable. Hall rightly notes that we find ‘agonistic elements of politics’ in Hampshire (p.71). He also stresses, however, that Hampshire’s work should not be ‘assimilated with the agonist current in contemporary political theory’ (p. 197). While Hall glosses over the complex relation between realism and agonism in Hampshire’s work too quickly, it is beyond the scope of this review to problematise this in more detail. What is, in my view, most remarkable about Hall’s portrayal of Hampshire – and for me, the highlight of the book – is that, although he confesses that ‘one is liable to become frustrated when trying to engage philosophically with Hampshire’s... work’ (p. 16), he paints the picture of an enormously thought-provoking thinker: Hampshire might well be the least ‘consistent’ of the three, but it is precisely this ‘inconsistency’, that is, his constant oscillation between pessimistic conservatism and optimistic progressivism, that might serve us well in our disenchanted world.

In many respects, Bernard Williams might be the most ‘straightforward realist’ of the three. There is, as Hall eloquently observes, one central question that links Williams’s ethical to his political theory: ‘how he [Williams] thought we could go on, avoiding moral and political paralysis, even when we accept that we cannot ground our moral and political commitments by appealing to some external, objective standard’ (p. 118). What Williams rejects – and here the parallels between him, Berlin, and Hampshire become striking – is the idea of an ‘Archimedean point’ (p. 118) or an ‘external vantage point’ (p. 125) that could objectively ground our ethical commitments. This scepticism about morality, though, is by no means an endorsement of ethical and political nihilism; rather, as Hall carefully works out, for Williams ‘the most basic evaluative political standards arise within politics’ (p. 139). This ‘political normativity’, therefore, shapes Williams’s later work and leads to his famous Basic Legitimation Demand, his endorsement of Judith Shklar’s ‘liberalism of fear’, or his prioritisation of ‘order’ as a prime political value.

It should already be clear that *Value, Conflict, and Order* is an immensely rewarding read not only for realists but for political theorists more generally. It is also, however, the high quality of the book that renders its limitations, and, perhaps, the limitations of the broader realist movement, particularly interesting. Recall

McQueen's praise that Hall vaults realism beyond a mere 'methodological critique' of moralism. For me, unfortunately, it is difficult to see this. It is undoubtedly true that Hall brings to the fore various constructive elements in realist thought; realism, he asserts, does not lead to nihilism and despair but to a healthy dose of scepticism that should guide our moral and political thought and action. And yet, all this remains curiously abstract. How does (Hall's) realism help us think through concrete problems such as climate change, human rights violations, the erosion of free speech, right- and left-wing populism, or racism? Undoubtedly, a realist would respond by pointing to the individual character of different cases, the inescapability of practical judgement, or the importance of restraint and prudence. But is this really enough for a tradition that attacks its opponents for their alleged moralism and abstractions? *Value, Conflict, and Order* is, I think, a good example of this curious shortcoming of the realist sensibility. Although Hall emphasises time and again that realism's starting-points are the 'real' conflicts and frictions of moral and political life, he has, with some exceptions, little to say about concrete political phenomena. As such, it is also telling that Hall thinks there is 'considerable scope for more sustained philosophical reflection from a realist perspective' (p. 169). Of course, I do not deny that realism could benefit from further philosophical sophistication; but if realism wants to be a credible alternative to moralism, and if it wants to be more than a methodological approach, then it must demonstrate, much more concretely, how its sceptical spirit helps us analyse, understand, and probably even address the complex political and moral problems of our time.

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