**Response to Little**

“It is not by chance that philosophy survives, that these sacred abstract texts, interminably read and reread by generations of students, incessantly commented upon and glossed, can weather the storms and high seas of our cultural universe, to play their part in it…it is because of the results they produce; and if they produce results, it is because these are required by the societies of our history” (Louis Althusser, ‘The Transformation of Philosophy’, in *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Social Scientists & Other Essays*, Verso, 1990, p. 254).

“The genealogical inspiration is the opposite of the judicial inspiration. The genealogist…also sees thinking as judging, but judging is evaluating and interpreting, it is creating values…the point of critique is not justification but a different way of feeling: another sensibility” (Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy,* Hugh Tomlinson trans. Continuum, 2002, p. 94).

**Introduction**

Adrian Little’s contribution to discussions of ‘realism’ and ‘idealism’ in contemporary political theory is most welcome. He brings a perspective (poststructuralism) that has not been especially prominent in recent debates. For example, in his survey of ‘realists’ the only poststructuralists Galston (2010) includes are Mouffe and Honig. In so far as both recognise that political life forms the horizon of political theory - that, as Honig has put it, we always begin politics *in media res* (2007: 2-3) - then they may be said to express a theory with a ‘realist’ aspect. But, given that each is interested in the instability (or ‘undecidability’) of that horizon, and also in identifying (perhaps also encouraging) the creative sorts of political action which can re-place it, they complicate realism, idealism and the relationship between them. So too does Little – particularly by insisting on the possibility of ‘undermining the construction of the real’ and the potentially irruptive political effects of ‘ideal’ or utopian thinking.

However, I think that in concentrating on ‘fact-derived’ realism Little inadvertently reduces political problems to matters of methodology leaving himself with only a plea for modesty and for the acknowledgement of ‘complexity’. While I welcome his commitment to ‘shifting the parameters’ I worry that he runs too fast from ‘realism’ and into an ‘idealist’ trap – the one where, having convinced ourselves that reality is inaccessible, we come to think that good politics confines itself to ‘debates’ about ‘possibilities’ and that weakness of ontology is the supreme political *virtu.*

In thinking through the relationship of political theory and philosophy to politics we should, I believe, never forget that our tradition began with Plato, as an argument about what philosophy must be if it is to guide the polis, and how the polis must be if it is to enable philosophers. Aristotle subsequently clarified that politics is ‘the most authoritative art’ because it ‘ordains which of the sciences should be studied in a state, and which each class of citizens should learn and up to what point they should learn them’ (*Ethics*, 1, 1, 1094b). Politics and philosophy still share this concern for the division and differentiation of forms of knowledge production; the promotion of some and the marginalisation or suppression of others; the specification of who is (and is not) suited to pursuing what; the establishment of the ways in which claims to knowledge must be publicly expressed or articulated. In so far as philosophy is a practice concerned to specify the limits to forms or fields of enquiry (be they epistemological, ethical or ontological limits), and to establish criteria and procedures for judging the adequacy, accuracy and stylistic appropriateness of work within these fields, it is fundamental to the ordering of life in a polis.

Little’s mistake, as I see it, is to think reality subject to contestation because it is too protean truly to be known (too ‘ambiguous’, ‘indeterminate’, ‘uncertain’, ‘unpredictable’, ‘contingent’) and is thus open to a plurality of interpretations. I understand poststructuralist, radical-democratic and agonistic political theories to be proposing not that political reality is simply too complex to know for sure but that *how* we know reality and how we articulate that knowledge are themselves part of real historical phenomena and that they are, in any particular moment, one of the constituent elements of a community or a state. Philosophy is thus always a part of politics and of (real) political struggles.

This position is of course opposed to forms of politics which imagine they are built around a single fixed or ‘sovereign’ centre or origin (be it epistemological, theological, aesthetic etc.). But to contest these with the counter-claim that they seek to know too much risks replacing the sovereignty of ‘presence’ with that of ‘absence’, leading theory and politics into mysticisms of the unknowable. In claiming sovereignty for either presence or absence, philosophy and theory play their part in affirming a governing regime – specifying the limits to experimental inquiry, identifying what is and is not knowable and sayable, and by whom. For those who fall outside of these limits (the governed) the problem with knowing and making claims on reality is not that it is too elusive but that ways of doing so are policed by those who claim it as their expert domain. Conflicts over the articulation of experiences of misogyny, racism and economic exploitation do not concern the truth of these experiences, their ‘complexity’, ‘contingency’ or ‘ambiguity’ but the admissibility and intelligibility of these truths in the regulated ‘court’ of (scientific, philosophical, public) opinion.

That court is part of a ‘critical’ politics and philosophy concerned with the specification of, and accommodation to, limits and is symptomatic of anxiety not about the lack of knowledge but of its excess. The list of things that can be known in a polis is near to endless. Not everyone in a polis knows the same things (or the same things in the same way) because not everyone shares the same place or moment. Different groups and classes know different things differently not simply because their ‘social context’ gives them a partial perspective subject to interpretation but because it (‘really’) puts them into different (‘real) relationships with reality. This is why historically significant truths (about, for instance, the relationship between men and women, about sexuality or ‘race’) come to be known not merely through ‘disinterested’ cognitive reflection but by social and political struggle of a kind that transforms participants relationship to the world. Such struggle includes (although it is not at all exhausted by) fights over the classification of things that will count as knowledge, and about the forms and genres within and through which knowledge can be articulated. From this perspective politics involves a contest between those concerned to set and enforce the limits to knowledge production and dissemination, and those engaged in creative (and perhaps utopian) acts by which the present state of knowledge is overcome.

It is against this context that we should, I think, consider the recent realism/idealism debates. Current discussion of realism and idealism is very often explicitly concerned with the organization of knowledge within and about politics, the proper domain of political philosophy and its relation to other kinds of knowledge about politics (such as social science or public opinions) and with the ways in which such knowledge should be articulated.

**The Limits of Liberal Realism**

On the idealist side, as is well known, Gerry Cohen saw the virtue of political philosophy as lying in its refusal to be contained by facts and a militant commitment to establishing inviolable principles: ‘ultimate principles cannot be justified *by facts*’ (2003: 219 emphasis in original). It may be relevant to political practice but ultimately ‘…the question for political philosophy is not what we should do but what we should think, even when what we should think makes no practical difference’ (2003: 243). Separated from the everyday and practical life of the polis political philosophy can commit itself to isolating and purifying principles, dividing conviction from application, and securing the former from contamination by the latter or, indeed, by any particular context (e.g. Cohen, 2008: 277). Its impracticality is the essence of its relationship to practical matters freeing it to identify the ultimate values that should inform our regulatory rules.

Cohen’s position has its attractions. Refusal to be governed by practical exigency opens onto a utopian sensibility and affords a place from which to criticize the moral imperfection, intellectual crudity and casual corruption of daily life. But the price to pay for this is blindness to the conditions that make such a position possible - to the political moment in which such utopianism seems like a valuable response, and to the political movements that might inculcate something different. Cohen’s philosophy divides, distinguishes, enumerates and clarifies as a prelude to showing the correct, because (from its perspective) the only possible, linear arrangement of propositions. Accordingly it produces works that begin as a stylized exchange of arguments in and through the private seminar, leading to writing of a kind which mostly refers to, draws on and addresses other philosophers so as to participate in a trans-historical project which has been undertaken ‘for a few thousand years by philosophers’ in search of an ‘elusive virtue’ and who ‘did not conceive themselves to be (primarily) legislators’ (2008: 304). It is concerned with ‘the structure of belief in principles’ not the experiential contexts or causesof such beliefs (2003: 31) and alternative styles of philosophy cannot be seen by it as anything other than ‘bullshit’ (Cohen, 2002).

In an opposing and suitably Promethean gesture David Miller has tried to bring thought down from such heavens and into the hands of ‘earthlings’. Political philosophy, he says, deals in concepts and principles which are dependent on both general facts and on contingent and particular facts about particular societies. We must recognize the ‘limits of political possibility’ the most important of which are set by ‘implicit assumptions about what, for us, would count as a tolerable or intolerable outcome’ (2008: 42), and by the things that ‘we – people in modern liberal societies – would regard as fundamentally unacceptable’ (2008: 43). Miller wants us to ‘explore the structure of those beliefs to find out which are fundamental and which are open to change in the light of evidence and argument’ (2008: 47). Realistic political theory thus allies itself with a certain sort of social scientist so that it can properly explicate and evaluate the terms given to it by a reasonable public in the particular society of which it is a part (and duly inform politics of its limits).

Swift and White agree with Miller that political philosophy must accept the constraints of politics and reconcile itself to ‘hard truths about contemporary democratic politics’ (2008: 65-6), not so as to erase the limits set by Cohen but, rather, so as to draw them more clearly and to specify better the correct place of political philosophy in the division of political and intellectual labour. Swift’s and White’s political theorists are modern professionals – like ‘transport analysts, economists, scientists’ - helping people to understand what is at stake in political disagreements, offering them ‘a perspective from which to assess and evaluate their would-be leaders’ political rhetoric’. Like good civil servants they accept ‘the constraints within which contemporary politics operates’ precisely so as to be ‘a useful guide to the practising politician’ (2008: 63). In touch with ultimate values yet aware of their limited potency in an imperfect world the political theorists must learn to convert the pure word into a form that might be audible in our deafened polis. Political theorists, Swift and White say, should pursue a ‘project of translation – from abstruse and sometimes technical books and journal articles into modes that our fellow citizens, or even our politicians, can make sense of’ (2008: 69).

Swift and White modify the ambitions of political theory while continuing to see its primary object of concern as the correctly and justly affirmed proposition. In contrast, Jeremy Waldron seeks to change the objects of political theory. Instead of ‘justice’ political theorists should think about legislatures, courts, elections, judges, monarchy, the civil service and so on. Where Cohen, White and Swift want to make our arguments better, Waldron seeks to improve the places within which those arguments take place. Theory must address itself ‘to politics and to the way our political institutions house and frame our disagreements about social ideals and orchestrate what is done about whatever aims we can settle on’ (2013: 8-9). This leads to a concern with the forms of political expression. The institutions of the state, through their ‘ordering presence’, distinguish meaningful propositions from what is merely ‘the roar of millions of blind mouths, shouting slogans and threats at one another, bellowing to get out of each other’s way’ (2013: 15). To contribute to the quality of these institutions political theory must communicate more clearly – and be assured that it ‘loses nothing by being made intelligible to our empirical colleagues and open to their input and interests’ (2013: 21).

What these four different positions share is as important as what distinguishes them. Each tries to specify the objects, limits and responsibilities of political philosophy and in so doing to demonstrate its proper place within the polis. But that place rests in part on political philosophy’s distance from politics and the consequent fact that it can see clearly the ways in which political reality is a disappointment. If it can find the right audience, and talk about the right things in the right language then it might be able to make things better.

**Why Now?**

These concerns are not new. Yet the current intensification of interest in them feels indicative of a specific anxiety, on the part of some theorists, about contemporary political philosophy and contemporary politics. What is the real political context for these realist philosophical interests?

To answer this question we must note that the realism-idealism debate primarily involves criticism of what Galston calls ‘the moralism, legalism and parochialism of American Liberal theory’. Lots of people have been critical of Liberalism of course; what is new is that the criticism comes from within Liberalism. As such the concern is not that the theory is wrong (that one should not be a Liberal) but that it isn’t working. The problem is to make Liberal political theory more effective in the world and this requires assessment of its objects of study, the problems to which it is addressed and the language in which it should express itself to other academics, to publics and to politicians.

This anxiety is symptomatic of huge political defeat. *A Theory of Justice* appeared in 1971. Since then inequality has greatly increased (and not to the benefit of the least advantaged). Liberalism has triumphed - but as a political project of ‘neo-liberalism’ which uses the tools of government to redistribute wealth and property to wealthy property holders, to weaken the institutions and police the practices that could contest this redistribution (trade unions, public broadcasting, universities, demonstrations) and also to inculcate the individualised self-capitalising sensibility that both furthers it and legitimates it. One of the things that realism is, is a reaction by social liberals to the era of Clinton and Blair – which is to say, to the capitulation of actually-existing social liberalism to the neo-liberalism of Thatcher and Reagan. That reaction is further conditioned by unwillingness to consider in depth the extent to which we might find implicated in this failure the genre of political philosophy that became hegemonic in Anglo-American universities alongside the neo-liberal state. Liberal idealism protects itself with the pose of distance from politics. Liberal realism blames the limits of publics and politicians, setting itself the challenge of adapting and adjusting to such reality so as find within it a modified role for political thought (and in which it can help politicians and publics to become better).

In finding that role, and seeking to secure it for itself, Liberal realism has also to respond to the troublesome proliferation of political conflicts beyond the formal domains of parties, electoral competition and legislation. Here, its anti-utopianism can develop into a kind of utopian nostalgia for integrative politics in an era of disintegrating globalization. In some cases this issues in the belief that all that is needed is a sufficiently renewed and republican sense of civic commitment (or acceptance of the value of national community). For the more radical this inspires a bold (and to my mind relatively agreeable) defence of ‘autonomous’ politics against individualised mechanisms of market-based decision–making. This opens onto varied theories of civic action and deliberation which also are formed against a backdrop of historic defeat.

Philosophy is a form of expression – sometimes spoken and often written. When Plato specified his ideal form of that expression he also proposed policing other forms such as literature, drama, music and dance. But he didn't have to contend with the internet, cable TV and a mostly literate population – nor did he have ‘freedom of speech’ as a foundational and article of faith. We do. One of the effects of the explosion in means of communication has been displacement of any ‘authoritative art’ which might wholly govern them. This is one reason why contemporary culture is riddled with contestation about what can and can’t be said to whom, by whom, in what medium, *and* about who or what can interpret such acts and say what they really ‘mean’. In the public sphere, the authority (and coverage) once afforded to philosophers or theologians is long gone. Journalists in search of advice or guidance on how best we might live, or on how we might make sense of things, will turn first to the nutritionist, psychologist or other journalists before they ask a philosopher; the politician will turn to the political psychologist, pollster or the behavioural economist. Everybody else can turn to Google where public articulation of many kinds is tethered to a ‘universal’ medium within which knowledge loses its ‘aura’. Meanwhile, genres of academic communication have ossified into the formulaic style of the written refereed journal article - a cause and effect of new ways of institutionalising and disciplining thought in the metric-driven academic factory.

It seems to me that the realism-idealism debate is, at least in part, a manifestation of frustration at this situation. The communicative form of political thought has thus once again become an explicit concern for political theory itself. A question which arises is, how can this be theorized? I believe that reflection on this question brings us back to the core issue of the relationship between political theory and politics.

**Political Theory and its Modes**

Little (with reference to Walker) uses the figures of Machiavelli and Hobbes to contrast two kinds of realism. One is open to fortune, the other is concerned to impose order. That is an accurate enough description of some of the things that Machiavelli and Hobbes wrote; it is far from a full picture of what they achieved. Both of them did something that allowed their names to become adjectives; they wrote books that gave life to concepts, metaphors and dispositions which have become (in varied and often contradictory ways) a part of actual political history. We might, then, ask ourselves not what relationship political theory could or ought to have to real politics but what relationship it has in fact had. What have been the effects on political history of particular theoretical inventions? How and why have they had those effects? Are they accidents, functions of some larger sociological reality or something to do with what was actually written?

Such questions are close to (if not exactly the same as) the sorts of question asked by Quentin Skinner when he seeks to understand political concepts ‘through the uses they are put to in argument’ and to analyse normative statements as not merely statements about the world but as ‘tools and weapons of ideological debate’ (2002: 176). This position is often misunderstood (including by liberal realists). For instance, Mark Philp is concerned that if we treat political theorists as political actors then we will ‘have to take what they say as wholly instrumental to some set of purposes vis-à-vis their opponents’ (140) whereas, Philp writes, political theory requires a ‘different character of argument and assessment, revolving around implicit criteria of rational acceptability than we find in rhetoric’ (2008: 140). While the analysis of texts in the history of political thought ‘must certainly pay attention to rhetorical strategies’, he says, ‘it must also seek to identify the values and commitments in relation to which such strategies are deployed’ (2008: 141).

This sort of criticism relies on the assumption that the form in which a political theory is expressed can be separated from its content. From this perspective Skinner and other rhetorical analysts are privileging form and denigrating content. But this is not how rhetoricians think. The claim is not that form is more important than content but that the two are inseparable. Theorists do not invent a theory and then work it up into a cunning communicative form. Theorising is an action which uses extant tools (concepts, words, genres), tries to articulate them in new ways (perhaps creating new tools in the process) and which may then become part of political history (and a tool that others may use). Rhetoric is not a necessarily manipulative or instrumental activity but intrinsic to all expression (and something which also has a history worth studying). For the rhetorician Philp’s declaration that, in reading Tom Paine, we must establish the things to which ‘he was really (and not just rhetorically) committed’ (2008: 144) - as if rhetoric were equivalent to pretending - makes no sense; how could we know Tom Paine’s thoughts without reading their expression (and experiencing its effects)?

Writing requires rhetorical ‘strategies’. Strategies are not bad things. They are simply plans or means of action for achieving some goal. Artists experiment with materials, sometimes ‘strategically’, in order to find out what they can and cannot express. Poets may deliberately confine themselves to a particular form (a sestina, a sonnet, an alexandrine) as a strategy for bringing thought, feeling and form into a particular kind of alignment. Indeed, it is out of such constraints that any art emerges. Political theorists are constrained by the vocabulary and genres available to them at the time they write (and by the communities with whom they are able to communicate). They must make decisions about which words to use and in what order, how to arrange concepts, how to employ or subvert established genres so as to make something thinkable for themselves and their readers. In so doing they may reach beyond their context and bring something new into the world.

Rhetorical readings such as Skinner’s ‘elevate’ rather than ‘reduce’ texts of political thought, honouring them philosophically, historically *and* *politically* by placing them into the societal context of which they were a part and into which they intervened. Its ‘rhetorical strategies’ and the fictions it invents (the ‘state of nature’, the ‘original position’) are something political theory and philosophy contribute to reality. That is why the theoretical analysis of the varied ‘texts’ of political thought (canonical and non-canonical) is a part of the theoretical analysis of politics and polities – of the shifting configurations of, and the contradictions and tensions within, systems of organizing the production, dissemination and articulation of knowledge about reality.

**Conclusion**

My point, is simply that realism and idealism are as real as each and other and that political theory in general is a real thing. It exists as books, pamphlets, journal articles, essays for think-tanks, speeches to activists, newspaper op-ed columns, blog posts and as genres such as dialogues, diatribes, polemics, poetic essays, experimental performances and numbered lists of propositions. One of the things political theorists can do is examine change in these over time and their relationship to the actual historical effectiveness of particular political theories - the extent to which their expressions became generalised and altered the shape of what was sayable. The identification and elucidation of the forms in which real political theory enters into real politics is itself a matter for political theory (and doing so requires a broadening of the ‘canon’ to include, in addition to official academic theorising, other instances of political theorising by political actors, artists, scientists and more).

There is a legitimate worry that such an approach may become 'historicist' and, as Philp puts it, abolish ‘any place outside the language or discourse that escapes this historical specificity’. But to think historically is not only to think about the past. It is also to think about the future. That demands a grasp of the present – of what got us here, of the potentialities and forces within it which includes, of course, the political movements and counter movements with which political theorists can be aligned. A political theory has effects when its mode of expression (how it manifests itself in social reality) resonates with a group, class or other community to whom it can address itself. Its capacity to do so is thus greatly affected by the formal and informal institutions and conventions of communicative practice. The ‘real politics’ of which theory can be a part is not an abstraction: it is the actual political, cultural and economic system in which we live and the actual movements of conflict, consensus and contest within it. To think political theory in its historical context is not to confine thought within its moments but to try and grasp reality as it is (‘now and around here’) so as to act and bring about its transformation. It seems to me that Little wants to find a way to speak about politics that might help us open up some routes to new territory. I welcome that effort and think that it is one that demands collective commitment to understanding the conjuncture in which we find ourselves, the movements that are at work within it and the spaces within which new thoughts are being articulated.

Of course, political theory and philosophy is only one of the kinds of expression we find in political practice (which also includes, for example, political organising, demonstrating, striking and many other things which were, until very recently, widely recognized as appropriate objects of political-theoretical reflection). We should, as Little suggests, be modest about what political theory can do alone. A political theory’s effectiveness, if it has any, is part of larger and more general historical processes. And that in turn demands a political theory for which an understanding of its historical moment (and of the forces within it that might lead beyond it) is an internal and intrinsic moment rather than an afterthought. The position a theory takes to such processes and to its own conditions of production is part of what it is, and this is often manifested as propositions about the forms of knowledge that can take precedence in the state (and those which cannot), and as assumptions about how one should write and speak and for whom. To put it more straightforwardly: political theory always takes sides and you can tell which side it is on by looking at who it speaks to and how it speaks to them.

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