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ABSTRACT
In this paper I unpack a realistic conception of politics by tightly defining its constitutive features: conflict and order. A conflict emerges when an actor is disposed to impose his/her views against the resistance of others. Conflicts are more problematic than moralists realize because they emerge unilaterally, are potentially violent, impermeable to content-based reason, and unavoidable. Order is then defined as an institutional framework that provides binding collective decisions. Order is deemed necessary because individuals need to cooperate to survive, but groups cannot spontaneously secure collective decisions and are prone to conflicts. Particularly, the fact that potentially violent conflicts emerge unilaterally means that order requires coercion. I conclude that mischaracterizing conflict and order leads to undesirable normative principles, and that this criticism can be leveraged not only against Rawlsian liberals who moralize conflicts away, but also against some agonists who underestimate the need for order and some communitarians who underplay both circumstances.

KEYWORDS Political realism; moralism; conflict; politics; pluralism

Introduction

Political realism has deep historical roots, encompassing major political thinkers like Thucydides ([404BC] 1954), Machiavelli ([1532] 2010), Hobbes ([1651] 2009), and Weber ([1919] 2004). Recently, this longstanding tradition in political thought has been revived as a criticism of Rawlsian liberal theories (e.g. Cohen, 2008; Rawls, 1971). Even if realism is far from a homogenous tradition (Frazer, 2010; Sabl & Sagar, 2017), its critical bite is fairly uncontroversial: realists reject 'moralism' (Williams, 2005, p. 5), variously qualified also as an 'ethics-first' view (Geuss, 2008, p. 1), 'liberal humanism' (Gray, 2002), or 'high liberalism' (Galston, 2010, p. 385).

The boundary between political realism and this polemical target, however, is not always as clear as the harshness of the debate suggests. While some believe that political realism is exclusively concerned with feasibility (Valentini, 2012; Zuolo, 2012), most realists agree that this concern does not exhaust realism (Hall, 2017; Rossi, 2016, Sleat, 2014b). Since many advocates

of the Rawlsian paradigm are also sensitive to feasibility constraints, meeting these constraints hardly seems to require a switch to realism. The dividing line is also blurred on a substantive level, as many realists support liberal values (Finlayson, 2017; Miller, 2016): liberalism (Sleat, 2013), equality (Jubb, 2015a), liberty (Hall, 2017), social justice (Philp, 2016), and even non-violence (Mantena, 2012).

Many have tried to vindicate realism by claiming that the 'defining feature of realism is the attempt to give autonomy to political normativity and political theorising' (Rossi & Sleat, 2014, p. 690) and revealing realism's 'fundamentally different conception of politics' (Sleat, 2014b, p. 5). However, how this is different from moralistic outlooks and what this difference entails is rarely specified. This paper unpacks realism's specific conception of politics and uses it as a basis to explain why moralistic views are deficient.

Most realists endorse a conception of politics that revolves around conflict and order. However, this assumption is often underdeveloped or implicit. The argument I put forward intends to be a rational reconstruction of realism: it is partly interpretative because it views conflict and order as the key realist insights, but also partly innovative because it defends a specific conceptualization of these ideas and shows how these ideas can be applied to criticize other paradigms.

This article contributes to realist literature in three ways. First, it takes seriously realists' claim that politics ought to constrain normative theorizing (Rossi & Jubb, 2015, Sleat, 2016) and works out a conception of politics grounded on the inevitability of conflict and the need for order. Second, it explains in what sense a 'flawed conception of the political' (Sleat, 2014b, p. 9) undermines normative theorizing. Finally, it presents an original application of the conceptual argument beyond Rawlsian liberalism to show that some agonists and communitarians are at fault as well.

Some realists expressed doubts about the idea of conceptualizing politics. Williams suggests that 'trying to give a definition of the political […] would certainly be fruitless' (Williams, 2005, p. 12). On the same pages, however, Williams explicitly presents a 'broader view of the content of politics', and many realists acknowledged that Williams' conception of politics played a fundamental role in his argument (e.g. Raekstad, 2018). Geuss agrees that one does not need 'an antecedent ontological specification of a distinct domain called "politics"' (Geuss, 2008, p. 23). Yet Geuss tried to reduce the ambiguity between politics in a wide sense (any form of social coordination) and in a narrow sense (coordination through coercion and legitimacy claims) (Geuss, 2014, p. 149–50). For these reasons, other realists argued overtly that 'much contemporary liberal theory has assumed a flawed conception of the political' (Sleat, 2014b, p. 9).

This article will be structured as follows. In the first part, I introduce Jeremy Waldron's account of the circumstances of politics, highlighting its

merits and shortcomings. This preliminary part should lay the basis for recasting the 'circumstances of politics' in more realist terms.

In the second part, I claim that conflict, rather than pluralism, is a constitutive feature of politics. Here I define conflict as emerging among agents who hold contrasting preferences with at least one agent exhibiting a disposition to impose their preferences on others. As such, conflicts develop unilaterally, are potentially violent, impervious to content-based reasoning, and ultimately unavoidable.

In the third part, I claim that the need for order is the second constitutive feature of politics. Here I maintain that individuals are unsuited to survive on their own, yet groups need binding, collective decision-making mechanisms to defuse internal conflicts.

In the fourth part, I explain the realist charge against moralism's practical irrelevance in terms of a mischaracterization of these constitutive features of politics. As such, this critique is essentially realist and non-reducible to non-ideal theory. Hereby, I also respond to two objections: the realist stance is merely definitional, and moralism is relevant even if practically useless.

Finally, the previous argument reveals that the criticism of misrepresenting the nature of politics can be leveraged against three other ideal-type examples. I briefly anticipate such a development by suggesting that Rawlsian liberals moralize conflict away, agonists underestimate the need for order, and communitarians underplay both.

Circumstances of politics

A good starting point to conceptualize politics is Waldron's (1999, p. 3) argument that political philosophy has had at least two importantly different aims:

> (i) theorizing about justice (and rights and the common goods etc.), and (ii) theorizing about politics […] reflecting on the purposes for which, and the procedures by which, communities settle on a single set of institutions even in the face of disagreement about so much that we rightly regard as so important.

Ever since Rawls (1971, p. 3) claimed that 'justice is the first virtue of social institutions', political philosophy has focused on theorizing about justice. While this may be an interesting enquiry, Waldron (1999, p. 3) insists that the 'distinct agenda' of political philosophy lies in theorizing about politics.

But how is theorizing about politics different? Waldron believes that the difference rests in the circumstances of politics, which makes politics both possible and necessary. The term is borrowed from Rawls's (1971, p. 109–12) circumstances of justice, who, in turn, borrowed it from Hume (1978, p. 20). Rawls argued that justice, as a virtue and a practice, is both possible and

necessary when human beings are capable of 'limited altruism' and live in a 'condition of moderate scarcity' of resources (Rawls, 1971, p. 110). Thus, theorizing about justice is only appropriate insofar as these circumstances apply.

Adapting the argument to politics, Waldron (1999, p. 102–3) argues:

> the felt need among the members of a certain group for a common framework or decision or course of action on some matter, even in the face of disagreement about what that framework, decision, or action should be, are *the circumstances of politics* […] Disagreement would not matter if there did not need to be a concerted course of action; and the need for a common course of action would not give rise to politics as we know it if there was not at least the potential for disagreement about what the concerted course of action should be. [emphasis in original]

Thus, in order to theorize about politics, one must not moralize these circumstances of politics or abstract them away.

The first of Waldron's circumstances is disagreement. This view draws on Rawls's (1989, p. 246) idea that a 'diversity of conflicting and irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines [is] not a mere historical condition that may soon pass away; it is a permanent feature of the public culture of democracy'. Partly due to our epistemic deficiencies – the so-called burdens of judgment – we are unable to establish which view happens to be true. Contrary to Rawls, Waldron (1999, p. 164) more radically claims that moral objectivity itself would be 'irrelevant' because people would still disagree, and we do not have an uncontroversial method to assess which claims are 'true'. Moreover, Waldron points out that Rawls is mistaken in believing that while disagreement affects comprehensive theories of the good, a political conception of justice can be somewhat insulated from it. Waldron (1999, p. 151) concedes that Rawls 'does not deny that people disagree about what justice requires. But he doesn't say much about this disagreement in his own discussion'. Waldron thus contends that underestimating the wide impact of disagreement in any fashion might be permissible in theorizing about justice, but it derails theorizing about politics. Philosophers who, 'by some philosophical subterfuge, try to wish the facts of plurality and disagreement away' (Waldron, 1999, p. 99) are seriously mistaken.

The second circumstance of politics is coordination. Waldron (1999, p. 101–2) vaguely states that 'in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons, large numbers of us believe we should act, or organize things, together. […] In fact, when it actually takes place, action-in-concert is something of an achievement in human life'. He appeals to the intuition that many things that people want can be achieved only if they act in coordination with other people, following rules and establishing institutions. However, 'action in concert is not easy, particularly once people have a sense of themselves as individuals and of the ways in which acting with

others might conflict with smaller scale projects of their own' (Waldron, 1999, p. 102). Most philosophers indeed agree that coordination is desirable, albeit their reasons are rarely spelled out (Heath, 2006). Believing that social coordination is both desirable and *difficult*, Waldron considers it to be a crucial circumstance of politics.

Thus, Waldron (2013, p. 1) concludes that political philosophers should focus more on '*political* political theories'; thinking about politics rather than theorizing about justice. To do so successfully, they must stay clearly focused on what politics is about, by acknowledging politics' circumstances.

Waldron's account is a promising ground for responding to moralism, but it is not realist enough insofar as it encompasses the same fallacy ascribed to Rawls by proposing a moralized account of disagreement. While Waldron (1999, p. 93) criticizes Rawls for restricting philosophically relevant disagreement to reasonable disagreement about the good, he similarly confines it to disagreement 'in good faith'.[1] Yet, if we accept that people disagree for a variety of reasons that are not only in good faith, we realise how dangerous and pervasive conflict can be. Furthermore, Waldron also fails to analyse thoroughly the practical significance of this felt need for common decisions. In what follows, I recast the idea of the circumstances of politics under a more realist light.

The inevitability of conflict

Realists typically think that politics is concerned with something more dramatic than pluralism: conflict. However, they rarely explicitly state what conflict is and what makes it distinct.

Conflicts do not refer just to any kind of incompatibility among disembodied ideas but require political carriers with a specific disposition to impose their views. As such, I propose to define conflict as:

> A social relation characterized by two or more actors (institutions, individuals or groups): (1) who have incompatible preferences; and (2) at least one of whom intends to impose his/her preferences on others.

This definition combines two elements present in the literature. First, the widespread intuition that conflict expresses some kind of incompatibility is widely shared in political science (Bealey, 1999, p. 79; Nicholson, 1992, p. 11) and sociology (Galtung, 1996, p. 70; Simmel, 1904, p. 490). The second element of the definition recalls the Weberian insight that we have conflict 'insofar as an action is oriented intentionally to carrying out the actor's own will against the resistance of the other party' (Weber, 1978, p. 38).

These elements are jointly required for conflicts to emerge. Without contrasting preferences, actors could easily live in a state of spontaneous harmony. The disposition to impose one's views on others would not matter

if everybody were to share the very same views. Conversely, incompatible preferences would not pose a dangerous challenge if people were not willing to impose them on others.

While both conditions are essential, the specificity of realism's conception of politics lies in emphasizing the disposition to impose one's preferences on others. The contrast among preferences is on the other hand a ubiquitous assumption within political philosophy, understood as 'actual pluralism' (Newey, 1997, p. 307): 'the empirically based recognition of the presence of a plurality of views and values as something significant for political theory' (Ceva, 2007, p. 362).[2] While virtually all contemporary political theories view the fact of pluralism as an unavoidable condition in modern societies, conflict is a subset of pluralism, which singles out the dangerous disposition to impose on others. Within the broad category of pluralism, conflict is opposed to a mutually exclusive subset: the reasonable pluralism of the Rawlsian tradition specifically requires people not to impose on others, as I will explain more in detail in the final section.

Emphasizing the disposition to impose on others is important because it highlights four critical features of conflict: (1) unilateral emergence; (2) potential for violence; (3) indifference to content-based reasoning; and (4) inevitability.

First, conflicts emerge unilaterally because whenever an actor is willing to carry out his/her view against those who do not share it, their targets find themselves in a conflict whether they like it or not. Suppose you and I believe in different religions. Yet while you intend to entertain an educated debate about the plausibility, flaws, or merits of each confession, I simply wish you to behave as my faith demands. In this situation, you do not have the disposition to impose your own preferences on me, but the fact that I do is sufficient for our relationship to be conflictual: you either submit or defend your view. Generalizing, one may prefer to resolve the contrast of preferences by deliberating on which of the incompatible views is substantively 'right', or by bargaining on a mutually agreeable solution. However both parties must have this disposition in order for these solutions to be viable.

In addition, since violence can be an efficient tool to force others to conform to our preferences as all conflicts involve a 'real possibility of violence' (Schmitt, [1932] 2007, p. 33). Physical violence is in a basic sense the 'ultimate' power to settle the contrast of preferences (Poggi, 1990, p. 9). Suppose we disagree about who gets the last apple, and we decide that whoever wins a game of rock, paper, scissors will get to eat it. Imagine you win and I lose this game, but I am not satisfied with the outcome because I really long for the apple. I could always unilaterally escalate the situation by trying to take the apple by force, and the result of the previous game instantly loses all relevance in deciding who gets to eat the apple. At this

point, you either concede and leave me the apple, or you will have to fight me over it. Once we are locked in a violent struggle, however, there is no possibility to unilaterally escalate the situation to another level in a similar way because there is no other level that overrides the ability to kill the other person. You may try to convince others to join the struggle on your side, on the grounds that I violated our agreement to settle the issue through a game. The outcome of the previous game in this case may strengthen your position in the violent struggle but does not decide who gets the apple by itself. If I am strong enough to overpower your allies, or I find allies for my side, I may still get the apple. Unilateralism is still the key idea here. Suppose you want to submit our quarrel for third-party arbitration to establish who is rightfully entitled to the apple. Unless the arbitrator is strong enough and willing to intervene to contain my violent impetus, you need me to agree to submit to his judgment. Otherwise I can unilaterally keep fighting, regardless of the arbitration. There is a certain 'ultimacy' to violence: it is the '*extrema ratio*' not only because all other options should be tried first, but also because there is no other to be pursued thereafter.[3]

One direct consequence of the unilaterality of conflict and the potential for violence is that the content of the opposed claims is irrelevant. Again, it does not matter how soundly you argue that my religious view is mistaken, wrong, or immoral. Your reasons can only be effective if I am interested in debating my beliefs with you. Indeed, one might go as far as to say that all considerations of content misinterpret the nature of conflict because conflict is not only about discordant preferences, but also about the disposition to impose them. Realists historically emphasized that reason-giving has a limited impact in changing others' preferences (Morgenthau, 1946). As Andrew Sabl (2017, p. 351) ironically asks: 'can one imagine a serious social movement suddenly collapsing when faced with a "better argument?"' Insisting that 'the most effective way to deal with human conflicts is to reason them out' (Dennes, 1946, p. 344) is a very dangerous attitude in politics because it fundamentally misinterprets this unilateralism of conflict.[4] Obviously, if both parties were inclined to reconsider their preferences, reasoning may be effective, but we cannot just presume the other actor shares this outlook. Once we enter a conflict, we know that the desire to prevail is stronger than the 'will to truth' (Nietzsche, 2002, p. 11) and that it consequently cannot be resolved by proving the opposing view is wrong. As Williams (2001, p. 6–7) puts it: 'political difference is of the essence of politics, and political difference is a relation of political opposition, rather than, in itself, a relation of intellectual or interpretative disagreement'.

This does not mean that politics is entirely a realm of conflicts, in which reasons never matter, and actors cannot compromise or review their stance. The point is that we should not view politics as the realm in which this happens naturally or consistently enough. This view of conflict need not rely

on a purely negative anthropology, one in which humans delight in forcing their will on others. Indeed, it would be implausible to claim that antagonistic behaviour is the sole human motivation. Rather, realism highlights a motivational pluralism, where moral considerations only partly influence how humans behave. People want a variety of things for a variety of reasons, and while they generally do not seek to deliberately impose their views, some might be disposed to do so in some relevant cases. It might even be better for them to get what they want without having to resort to costly struggles. Yet the cost of a struggle may sometimes be acceptable.

Due to conflict's unilateral emergence, and its potential for violence, even a few individuals with this conflicting disposition pose a significant threat to political institutions. As Hobbes (1983, p. 33) argued, 'though the wicked were fewer then the righteous, yet because we cannot distinguish them, there is a necessity of suspecting'. As long as everyone is not consistently prevented from either having different views or trying to impose them on others, then our society will always be conflictual and at risk of violent outbreaks. Unilateralism means that even a small minority, which wishes to impose its view, still prompts conflicts with many others. The violent potential of these conflicts can of course be contained – indeed most societies achieve this. The point is however that conflict cannot be eliminated at its root, even if its violent outbursts are often suppressed by public coercion.

To briefly recap this part, I argued here contrary to Waldron that it is conflict rather than disagreement in good faith that characterizes politics. Conflicts emerge when at least one actor tries to impose his/her views against those of others. Politics is not entirely about conflict, but the unilateral emergence of conflict makes it likely to occur even when only a few people exhibit this disposition. When conflicts do emerge, content-related reasons are ineffective and there is a concrete possibility for violence. Therefore, when theorizing about politics, conflict constitutes a more realist assumption than pluralism.

The need for a political order

Politics only arises when the tendency to conflict combines with the fact that humans are not individually self-sufficient and, even when they do form a group, they are in need of a coercive institutional framework to steer them one way or the other. I will address these two elements in turn: (1) the unlikelihood of individual survival and the subsequent need for cooperation; (2) the instability of spontaneous cooperation and the need for what I term 'order'. Whilst the first is virtually undisputed, the second represents a concern that, albeit shared, is distinctively emphasised by political realists.

First, individual humans are not self-sufficient and almost always form strong social ties with others. We are social animals not solely in the moral sense that we care (or ought to care) about fellow human beings, but more fundamentally in the material sense that we depend on each other to thrive. As a need, cooperation is independent from individual will. The need for food, for example, is something that every human being has whatever s/he believes or desires. One might not want to eat, but refusing to eat, while possible, ultimately entails death. Similarly, human beings need stable cooperation to increase their probability to survive as well as to provide for slightly more than the bare necessities of life. Indeed a large part of our evolutionary success hinged on our ability to cooperate (Turchin, 2016; Wilson, 2012), to the point that our ancestors, *Homo Sapiens*, used their social aptitude to develop language and took over competing human species like *Neanderthal*, who had larger brains and significantly stronger muscle structure (Harari, 2015). Something similar to this intuition must have been at work in the reflections of political philosophers throughout history since the need for cooperation is one of their oldest and most basic assumptions.[5]

Second, while cooperation may be a natural need, it is not one that is naturally satisfied. Many animals are solitary (like cats), because they do not need others to survive, or have unbreakable collective control (like bees), in the sense that they are not free to put their own interests above those of the group (Wilson, 2012). Neither animals are political. Contrary to both, human beings can always pursue their preferences against the resistance of others and at the same time need others to survive.

Any group will face recurrent challenges, both due to external events and from internal conflicts. In front of such challenges, there will be different claims about what the group should do, how it should get organised, and how the benefits and burdens of cooperation ought to be distributed. For realists, the presence of conflict and potential for anti-social violence always threaten to destabilize and unravel cooperation, which they nonetheless need. As different arrangements will distribute burdens and benefits differently, some will be tempted not to respect the cooperative scheme. And we know that only the few need have this intention for conflicts to be widespread.

Thus, in order to stably cooperate, human groups need rules that establish what behaviour is allowed and what the group should collectively do.[6] Contrary to bees, such rules are not hard-wired in our instincts; they do not spontaneously arise, and human beings do not naturally acknowledge and follow them. Rather, these rules are the product of some choice and ought to compel people in order to be effective. This institutional framework need not be formal and might involve loose rules and expectations. For example, the rule 'do what the strongest says' is a possible basis, albeit a primitive

one, which could yield general and binding collective decisions in some contexts. Order, so conceived, allows for cooperation of larger numbers. In particular, given the condition of permanent conflict described above, order is a necessary instrument to guarantee cooperation's persistence, against the possibility of individual noncompliance. What I dub 'order' can thus be defined as follows:

> An institutional framework for the production of binding collective decisions.

This definition of order is inspired by Sartori (1973, p. 21) who, in a classic article on the nature of politics, describes it as the place where groups issue 'binding commands *erga omnes* […] which the individual is less likely to escape, because of both their spatial extension and their coercive intensity'. Following a similar line of reasoning, politics has been more recently connected to 'behavioural compliance' and is about 'the production of a generalised and stabilised positive attitude towards complying' (Bartolini, 2018, p. ix). Thus, at the most general level, politics involves taking collective decisions in such a way that all the members of the group abide by them, even if they disagree and would be tempted to conflict with others.

Coercion is a key component in the way collective decisions are made binding. To see why coercion is decisive, we need to go back to the notion of conflict, and particularly its unilateralism and the ultimacy of violence. Escalation to violence works because once someone unilaterally prompts a violent struggle, others are locked in it and cannot unilaterally de-escalate it. Thus, if one wants to defuse conflicts to prevent violence, the only solution is to rely on a larger force (i.e. public coercion) as a way to shift violence away from private relationships. This explains why realists focus on the importance of physical coercion and believe that 'might in the sense of illegitimated coercion is a necessary ingredient of right' (Sleat, 2014a, p. 329).

While coercion is key to binding decisions, its monopolization may not be required. What is required by this account is strictly speaking only the 'monopoly to decide' (Schmitt, [1922] 2005, p. 13), the presence of an institutional framework that is widely recognized as the authoritative procedure to issue collective decisions. The degree to which this requires a monopoly of violence is a separate question. Realists often think that the state's 'monopoly of legitimate physical violence' (Weber, [1919] 2004, p. 33) is a necessary element of politics (Williams, 2001) but some contemporary realists argue that dispersed coercion may be enough to sustain binding decisions, even without the monopoly of force (Raekstad, 2018). Yet under present conditions, only modern states, given their monopoly of legitimate violence over a territory, seem to be able to provide order to large, conflicting social groups.

Realists are also keen on observing how order itself becomes a new source of conflict. Once individuals are bound to accord their behaviour to collective rules of cooperation, they also acquire a pressing interest to shape

these norms on the basis of their preferences. The difficulty to resort to private violence leads those willing to impose their preferences to attempt to do so in the political sphere. As such, even those without such a disposition must defend their interests if they do not want to comply with rules that reflect others' views rather than theirs.[7]

Summing up this section, I argued that order is a significant part of politics because individual human beings are not self-sufficient but need cooperation, yet this cooperation requires a system to block conflicts from unilaterally escalating to violence and to secure compliance with collective decisions. For this reason, politics is characterized by a need for order, understood as the production of binding collective decisions.

The constraining role of conflict and order

Realists lament that any political theory that does not fully acknowledge that politics is about the interplay between conflict and order is bound to lack practical relevance. The charge here is that by bracketing away or making false assumptions about the background conditions of politics, moralists develop misleading principles.

The problem is not so much that principles devised without keeping in mind conflict and order are unlikely or impossible to implement. Realism is not reducible to this concern about feasibility (Hall, 2017; Rossi, 2016; Sleat, 2014b). Rather, realists worry that ignoring conflict and order leads to prescriptions that fail to be *desirable* in political context. Imagine an engineer who designs the most desirable plane abstracting away the constraint of gravity. One might well conclude that – absent gravity – a cubic-shaped aircraft would ideally maximize both the number of passengers and their comfort. Such a cubic plane could indeed be built but it would not be able to fly. As such it is not unfeasible, but undesirable: a plane that does not fly is a 'bad' plane, a plane that people who want to fly somewhere would avoid. The key intuition is that idealizing the constitutive features of politics is not helpful because 'comparisons that illuminate will be to worlds that solve problems like ours, not worlds that lack problems like ours' (Schmidtz, 2016, p. 9). A good plane is one that solves the challenge of gravity, not one that ignores it. Other *desiderata* like comfort and capacity are only relevant once this is secured. Similarly, a good political theory is one that designs institutions that deal with the unavoidable recurrence of conflict and secure order.

To be fair, the undesirability of practical prescription deduced from abstract theories has also been diagnosed by non-ideal theorists (Farrelly, 2007). Yet, realism remains distinct because it is not a claim that idealizations and abstractions are bad as such. As Sleat (2014b, p. 4) observed, Hobbes is not less abstract than Locke, even though he is often considered

more realist. The realist point is practical, not methodological: it specifically concerns moralists' idealization of conflict and order, which significantly makes their theories unsuited to guide action in politics.

The structure of the realist argument is similar to the one adopted by Rawls with the circumstances of justice: limited altruism and moderate scarcity. Suppose someone provides a theory about just institutions, under conditions of infinite altruism and unlimited resources (e.g. Sandel's communitarianism, in the next section). Rawls would rightly respond that this situation fails to qualify as a theory of justice, as it lies outside the circumstances that make this concept relevant. It is not just that the prescriptions of such a theory would be unfeasible, but rather that they would point us in the wrong direction. As Hume (1978, p. 20), who first elaborates the concept of the circumstances of justice, eloquently puts it:

> Reverse, in any considerable circumstance, the condition of men: Produce extreme abundance or extreme necessity: Implant in the human breast perfect moderation and humanity, or perfect rapaciousness and malice: By rendering justice totally useless, you thereby totally destroy its essence, and suspend its obligation upon mankind'.[8]

The circumstances of politics, like the circumstances of justice, single out specific features about the context within which it makes sense to apply political normative claims.

Some authors might try to resist the realist argument by claiming that it is purely definitional and as such arbitrary at best and unsound at worst. Some criticisms along this line of reasoning creep up even internally to realism, when for example Freeden (2012, p. 8) warns against the risks of 'imposing our conception of the political on the rest of humanity, and by doing so yet again creep towards ideal-type political theory'. From the opposite camp, Estlund famously champions the counter offensive of 'methodological moralism' (Estlund, 2017, p. 365) claiming that 'politics has been defined out' (Estlund, 2014, p. 131) from his political philosophy. He objects that any definition is debatable, and realists arbitrarily exclude approaches they disagree with. Both these objections however misconstrue the realist claim as linguistic instead of practical. The point is not to give an abstract definition of politics but to identify real constraints that operate in political contexts.

The reason why moralism would lead us astray in such a way is found in the previous conceptualization of the constitutive features of politics. Conflicts cannot simply be abstracted or idealized away because due to their unilateral emergence and potential escalation to violence, one could be in a situation of conflict regardless of one's will. This argument grounds the classic realist remark that a 'man who wants to make a profession of good in all regards must come to ruin among so many who are not good'

(Machiavelli, [1532] 2010, p. 61). Moralists often object that we let people off the hook too easily with such considerations (Estlund, 2011). The problem however is that moralists not only idealize away the agent's disposition, but also everybody else's reactions to it. Particularly when evaluating institutions, moralist theory 'stipulates not only the policies to be adopted by the state, but also how the public is to react to those policies' (Huemer, 2016, p. 226) and tends to tell agents how they should behave, provided that everybody else also behaves how they should behave.[9] Realists on the contrary emphasize that *political* philosophy is about 'what would be ideal in a strategic world' (Schmidtz, 2016, p. 2–3) and aim to tell people the best way to act, given that everybody else behave how they are *likely* to behave. By assuming others behave justly or reasonably, the need to deal with conflicts and secure cooperation through a coercive order is underplayed. Reasoning with others and seeking a fair agreement is what we should do provided everybody else does it as well. But since at least some individuals care little for debates and are prone to impose against others, political philosophers ought to consider conflicts.

Moralists might then contend that abstracting away certain features of conflict and order may still be useful. Cohen (2008, p. 268) most famously claimed that 'the question for political philosophy is not what to do but what to think, even when what we should think makes no practical difference'. Stemplowska (2008) goes as far as to claim that ideal theory plays an essential role, even if in practice it needs to be supplemented by non-ideal theory. Of course, realism need not deny that there may be something intellectually interesting in focusing on such a 'theory of ideals' (Hamlin & Stemplowska, 2012). But the problem is that these evaluations, insofar as they are detached from the context of recurring conflict and the need for binding collective decisions, severely distort judgment about what individuals should do in political contexts and about what institutions would be most desirable. Erman and Möller (2018) also argue that ideal theorizing is indeed useful, by introducing a distinction between a theory *of* politics and a theory *for* politics. Even granting that moralism fails to qualify as a theory of politics, they reject the realist claim that 'in order for a theory to be a theory for a phenomenon, it must be a theory of that phenomenon' (Erman & Möller, 2018, p. 7). They argue that many theories external to a practice may be valuable in guiding behaviour within that practice. Laws of mechanics, for example, are quite usefully applied to billiards even if they are not – properly speaking – part of a theory of billiards. Realists need not claim that idealized theories are always irrelevant in guiding a practice. Yet, whether they are relevant depends on what is abstracted and is ultimately determined by the practice in question. The example of billiards and physics deployed by Erman and Möller ultimately confirms this point. Indeed, laws of mechanics can be useful for billiards, but on the basis of *criteria* that are

intrinsic to the practice of billiards: namely to win a match by bouncing balls into holes. This context, moreover, determines what is useful to abstract away: the Law of Free Fall abstracts friction away, yet when we are playing billiards doing so would make us lose the game. Realists do not deny that any political *philosophy* necessarily involves some abstractions. Hobbes ([1651] 2009) for example argues that despite their differences all men ought to be considered equal because they are equal in their ability to kill others. Even this paper argues quite abstractly in favour of conceiving politics in a certain way. However, these abstractions are justified by their practical importance: conflict's unilateral emergence and violent potential threaten to destabilize the vital cooperative framework, whether philosophers like it or not.

In short, realism shares some of the concerns of non-ideal theory, but it is not reducible to it because it is not necessarily against all idealizations and abstractions but singles out two conditions that mark the scope of the practice of politics and its sensible theorizing, in a similar way as the circumstances of justice single out the scope of justice.

Three types of moralism

If the previous argument is sound, three different 'ideal-types' of unrealistic theories can be distinguished. This categorization is useful to understand when a theory falls short and how to make it more realistic, should one desire to do so. This section is not meant to provide a detailed criticism of these three paradigms – each would require a separate paper to discuss fairly. The intent here is to illustrate how the circumstances of politics, as I have qualified them, suggest different lines of criticism against different approaches.

First, there is the cluster of theories which recognize the unavoidable human need for a political order but underestimate the presence of conflict. Rawlsian liberalism is usually criticised for this reason. Rawls (2001, p. 1) shares a declared affinity with the realistic circumstances of politics when he states that political philosophy's 'practical role arise[s] from divisive political conflict and the need to settle the problem of order' and indeed some realists granted that 'Rawls is more realist than many realists realise' (Jubb, 2015b, p. 919). However, what makes Rawlsian liberalism problematic for a realist outlook is that Rawls moralizes the 'divisive political conflict' with his assumption of 'reasonable pluralism' (Rawls, 1993, p. 24).

Persons are reasonable when 'they are ready to propose principles and standards of fair terms of cooperation and to abide by them willingly, given the assurance that others will likewise do so' (Rawls, 1993, p. 49). Reasonable people do not exhibit the disposition to impose their views against the resistance of others but will seek to propose and abide by fair

terms of cooperation. As a consequence, reasonable people are sensitive to the substantive content of contrasting preferences in a way that conflicting people are not. In addition, reasonable individuals would avoid the recourse to violence. So conceived, pluralism among reasonable people can be seen as a subset of pluralism that is opposed to the realist conception of conflict.

This is not merely a conceptual distinction. Unreasonableness is present in any society and will pose a widespread challenge to reasonable individuals who can be dragged into a conflict even against their will. These conflicts cannot be solved away or suppressed once and for all but can only be kept in check. Rawls indeed allows reasonable individuals to fight back unreasonable ones, when they fail to adhere to the reciprocity *proviso* ('provided that others will likewise do so'). Yet he downplays the fact that conflict arises even when a limited number of unreasonable individuals exhibit the will to impose on others and thus requires consistent coercive suppression to stop violent escalations.

A practical example of this distinctive approach of realism is John Gray's (2002, p. 112) discussion of Singapore's religious freedom. Imagine a society riddled with conflicting religious views. In this context, public declarations of faith and conversions may act as a catalyst for tremendous social violence. Due to intense religious strife, it made sense in Singapore to curtail freedom of religion by banning proselytising. This is clearly a violation of free speech and a limitation on the fully-fledged religious freedom recommended by liberal moralists. Yet in a context of intense religious antagonism, this freedom would ignite violent confrontations if proselytising were allowed. At the same time, freedom to believe in any religion was permitted and, interestingly, this was instrumental in keeping the system stable despite strong religious tension.

While Rawls is concerned with political stability, he also holds, contra Williams, that unjust institutions are unstable because only justice is compatible with human flourishing. Realists reply that it is not injustice, but perceived injustice that undermines stability. The case of Singapore shows that conflict among religious faiths (contrasting views and believers' willingness to impose their views on others) led to a suboptimal situation in which the first question of political order demanded normative modesty with respect to the freedom of speech, an outcome a moralist would find undesirable. This is one way in which realists can tailor 'prescriptions to the constraints of real politics, rather than the other way around' (Rossi, 2013, p. 558), even if it comes at the cost of what many disqualify as 'the low bar conclusion' (Erman & Möller, 2018, p. 5).

At the opposite end of the spectrum lay theories of politics focusing exclusively on the inevitability of conflict. Agonists realistically highlight the irreducible dimension of conflict and criticise political idealism for portraying

a sugar-coated account of the political world. Yet many agonists *overemphasize* the conflictual dimension and do not appropriately track the need for order. Ernesto Laclau for example supported the reductive claim that politics is conflict (Norris, 2006, p. 115). In his view, any common ground is ruled out ex hypothesis: 'effort to determine rational identifiable "interests" [...] ends up being inconsistent' (Laclau, 1990, p. 15) and 'all objectivity necessarily presupposes the repression of that which is excluded' (Laclau, 1990, p. 31). As such, even the need for order is ultimately itself contestable and Laclau fails to appreciate its indispensable role for stabilizing human cooperation.

While specific institutional arrangements are not universally endorsed, realists contend that the need for one such system cannot be neglected. One reason is that conflicts are only politically salient because we cannot avoid living with other human beings. The mere existence of contrasting preferences or the inclination to impose our will on others would not matter much if each of us could live on our own island, detached from the influence of others. Another reason to reject the exclusive focus on conflict is that the celebration of violence that emerges from such writings seems hardly 'realistic' (Norris, 2006, p. 112). Realism should soberly acknowledge the persistent existence of conflicts among humans, recognizing their potentially destructive tendencies. Praising them solely for their radical revolutionary power is hardly a realistic outlook.[10]

The farthest position to the realistic conception of politics is approximated by communitarian thinkers. They misinterpret realist circumstances of politics, to the extent that, curiously, many among realists, liberals, and agonists converge on criticising communitarianism. Communitarians, according to their critics, 'overlook precisely the politics of "community"' and, as such, this approach '*barely looks like a political theory at all*' (Frazer, 1999, p. 2) [emphasis in original].

Contrary to Rawls' circumstances of justice, Michael Sandel (1998, p. 35) proposes to start theorizing from what he calls the 'circumstances of benevolence'. His communitarian outlook depicts a more ideal situation in sharp contrast to the circumstances of justice, in which people are capable of unlimited altruism or there is no scarcity of resources. As it is evident, such an account contradicts the circumstances of politics as well because there is no need for order if scarce resources do not threaten human survival, and no conflict if individuals were well inclined to do anything for their fellows.

Curiously, liberals reacted to the moralized view of communitarians by raising the same criticisms that realists now raise against them. Amy Gutmann (1985, p. 319–20), for example, observes that it does not 'make theoretical sense to assume away the conflicts among competing ends [...] In so doing, the critics avoid discussing how morally to resolve our conflicts and therefore fail to provide us with a political theory relevant to our world'.

What communitarians have in mind with their ideal is 'a community whose primary bond is a shared understanding both of the good for man and the good of that community' (MacIntyre, 2013, p. 290). Discordant worldviews on this account can only be generated by interferences from outside the community. This view assumes an underlying natural unity in society, which only external influences are able to disrupt. Bonnie Honig (1993, p. 184) makes a similar criticism when she observes that: 'Sandel assumes that any lack of closure in the identity of the subject comes from a multiplicity that is exterior from an environmental, plural constitutedness that, if sorted out in the right setting, in a better environment, can be uncovered to disclose an underlying and authentic and enabling unity'. In plain words, not only do all contrasts originate from outside the community, but also can be easily and naturally reabsorbed by that community. In fact, Sandel 'implicitly assumes that the multiple ends and identity formations of the intra-subjective conception are susceptible to harmonization and ordering in the right setting' (Honig, 1993, p. 180).

Thus, communitarianism seems to downplay conflict as well as the need for order insofar as conflicts are harmonizable accidents generated by external influences and order is not really a need at all because it spontaneously arises from within the community.

Conclusion

I have claimed that the peculiarity of political realism lies not in feasibility, nor in its substantive political views, but in its understanding of the political sphere, which constrains normative theorizing. I have tried to unpack this generic claim by arguing that it revolves around the two constitutive features. The first is conflict, distinct from moralistic pluralism because of the tendency to impose one's will against others, which leads to the unilateral emergence of conflict, ineffectiveness of content-based reasoning, and potential for violence. The second is the need for order, understood as an institutional framework for taking binding collective decisions, which necessitates coercion to disarm conflicts. This need is required because humans cannot survive on their own, but cooperation is not spontaneous. Theories that moralize, abstract, or idealize these factors are bound to issue undesirable prescriptions in our *political* world. This conceptualization allows us to distinguish political realism from theories that fail to account for conflict (Rawlsian liberalism), for the need for order (political agonism), or both (communitarianism). By misinterpreting the nature of politics, these fail to understand what is at stake and mislead political action.

Closing with a metaphor, real politics for realists is quite different from an academic seminar. First, in an obvious sense, academics are looking for the most convincing arguments, and not merely to have their position to be

imposed on others (if this seems already an idealization, it shows how pervasive conflicts are to human relations). Second, and less obviously, when the seminar ends, all participants are free to go their own way without committing to any of the positions debated. Both of these assumptions are false in politics. First, humans tend to fiercely disagree about issues, and actively try to impose their views on others, sometimes even violently. Second, the fact that people live and need to live together in a cooperative way requires them to constantly take binding collective decisions about how to do so.

Three types of moralism.

	Acknowledge Order	Idealise Order
Acknowledge Conflict	Political Realism	Agonism
Idealise Conflict	Rawlsian liberalism	Communitarianism

Notes

1. This suits Waldron's general argument because he wants to defend majoritarianism as a decision-making procedure. In his view, only good faith disagreement about the common good would provide reason to the minority to accept majority decisions.
2. Moralistic pluralism is more concerned with contrasts among values rather than among material interests in the same value setting. However, this need not be the case: 'Within the pluralist literature, values range from mere preferences, through interests, goals and goods, to ideals, virtues, conceptions of the good, entire cultures, moral codes, ideas and assumptions' (Bellamy, 2002, p. 4). Similarly, realism is interested in emphasizing both 'the ubiquity of moral disagreement and conflicts of interest in politics' (Jubb, 2015a, p. 680).
3. All conflicts have this potential for turning violent, but this need not always happen. Sometimes the aggressor finds more effective methods to impose his/her way, e.g. through threats and blackmail. In other cases, the aggressor may be prevented from acting violently because the costs are too high. Others may be too strong to challenge, or there may be an institutional framework in place that overpowers individual attempts to impose one's preferences through violence (as we will see in the next section). In all these cases, conflicts are still present even if their potential for violence remains latent.
4. Although it is worth noting that some moralists are careful not to push their claims so far in 'real speech situations' (Estlund, 2008, p. 184). Sections 4 and 5 clarify the extent of the realist critique.
5. Perhaps the most famous example is Aristotle (1998, p. 4–5): 'Anyone who cannot form a community with others, or who does not need to because he is self-sufficient, is no part of a city-state he is either a beast or a god'.
6. Politics, in a loose sense, is a matter of 'collective instrumental rationality', the way a social group poses and answers the question 'what shall we do?' (Rodríguez-Alcázar, 2017, p. 738).

7. Interestingly, conflict and order, in this view, are not two opposing extremes. They can coexist because the only task of order is to prevent conflicts from becoming violent and to ensure cooperation, not to consistently suppress contrasting preferences or the willingness to impose them on others.
8. Interestingly, Hume characterizes both an upper boundary (extreme abundance) and a lower boundary (extreme necessity). The lower boundary seems to refer to Hobbes's state of nature. Realists are more concerned with the upper boundary, which is undermined by conflictual dispositions.
9. The literature on 'taking up the slack' argues in favour (Stemplowska, 2016) or against (Miller, 2013, p. 206) the idea that we ought to do more than our fair share to make up for those who do not comply with the demands of justice. Yet this is not necessarily related to politics but may apply to all sorts of private situations. Again, realism's focus is on how the specific pressure of conflict and order affects normative theorizing.
10. This critique however does not target all agonists. Mouffe (2009, p. 101), for instance, admits that politics regards the 'ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order and organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual'. To this extent she recognizes the need for 'peace', alongside 'conflict' (Cross, 2017, p. 3) and the 'ethico-political principles of liberal democracy: liberty and equality' (Mouffe, 2009, p. 102), which distinguishes between valuable agonism and problematic antagonism. It thus seems that Mouffe identifies both order and conflict as the realistic circumstances of politics.

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