

Review - Liberal Realism: a Realist Theory of Liberal Politics

Written by James Wakefield

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JAMES WAKEFIELD, JUL 7 2015

Liberal Realism: a Realist Theory of Liberal Politics

By Matt Sleat

Manchester University Press, 2013

Recent years have seen the emergence of a loose association of 'realist' political theorists, including Chantal Mouffe, Bonnie Honig, Mark Philp, Raymond Geuss and Enzo Rossi, who maintain that contemporary liberal theorists have thus lost touch with the confrontation and compromise of real politics. By picturing persons as ideal types—perhaps unfailingly reasonable, rational (and committed to a single, shared standard of rationality) and crucially liberal, or at least prepared to behave as such in public life—liberal theorists leave themselves unable to contend with the harsh reality of pluralist societies, in which there are deep, even fundamental disagreements over values, politics and much else besides. Indeed, there is very little genuine agreement, argue the realists, about even those things that liberal theorists take for granted when designing their arguments in favour of freedom and equality. Liberalism, in short, is unrealistic, and if its supporters are to engage with the problems of real politics, they must stop conceiving of it as an ideologically neutral doctrine prior to the day-to-day transactions of political life.

In *Liberal Realism*, Matt Sleat sets out to show liberalism as it really is. He shares many of the realists' anxieties about liberal theory, but he believes that a more realistic vision of liberalism is both attainable and a means for liberals to understand and overcome the challenges posed by those citizens who disagree fundamentally with their principles. Thus Sleat sets himself a hard problem: he must find a way to make sense of a doctrine that is at once realistic, in the sense that it addresses the basic political problem of securing order and stability despite deep, intractable, unavoidable disagreement, yet liberal, at least so far as it is not simply a *modus vivendi*, a glib equation of might and right, or limp 'anything goes' relativism (p. 100). It must have substance—it cannot be just the form of politics that happens to be dominant now—and the support of strong arguments. But, realistically conceived, liberalism is neither innocuous nor politically neutral, but rather an 'openly partisan hegemonic order' in which states are the 'restrained masters' of their citizens (pp. 160–161), their conduct governed by a few broad principles whose fine details, though agreeable to 'a significant proportion of those over whom the state rules' (pp. 117–118), are permanently open to dispute.

In the opening chapters of the book, Sleat contrasts the liberal and realist visions of the political, grounded respectively in consensus and discord, before articulating what he considers the most plausible version of the realist criticism of liberalism. In these chapters we see clearly one of the great strengths of the book. Unlike some of his fellow realists, contemporary or canonical, Sleat takes care to ensure that the liberalism he criticises is one that its supporters would recognise. His treatment of Rawls, probably the best known and most widely (even wilfully) misinterpreted of the recent liberals, is impressively even-handed, and he acknowledges that, especially in *Political Liberalism*, Rawls acknowledged (but did not offer much of an answer to) the problem of unreasonable, illiberal folk in liberal societies. The weakness of contemporary liberalism, argues Sleat, is not that it tries to do away with politics and disagreement, but rather its failure to acknowledge that 'political disagreements are only one fragment of the discord that politics is called upon to address' (p. 73). 'Unity, order, and stability', he explains, 'are not natural features of the human condition, but must be worked at and created through the sort of coercive political power that

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the state... has at its disposal. Politics must create harmony if no natural harmony exists. Political unity is therefore an achievement of politics' (p. 82).

Sleat develops his conception of liberal realism over the remainder of the book. He must steer a course between, on one side, unrealistic, implausibly consensus-driven moralism and, on the other, political pragmatism in which might is right and politics nothing more than a zero-sum competition between values. He considers, in other words, whether there is any place in his more realistic liberalism for a conception of legitimacy—a criterion to determine which forms of politics are normatively preferable to others. He insists that a realistic liberalism has the resources to make sense of legitimacy without making unduly controversial moral assumptions. The great strength of liberal theory is not that its claims about the moral value of freedom and equality are universally true, nor that its methods of drawing principles from hypothetical agreements are universally accepted, but that it produces stable, orderly societies in which everyone, rather than just a class of people who happen to be committed to freedom and equality already, can expect to be afforded the liberty 'to pursue their conception[s] of the good life free from state interference' (pp. 135–136). The accomplishment of the order and stability requisite to such liberty is 'incredible', though 'fragile', 'delicate', 'consistently in need of reform and adjustment and by no means certain to last' (p. 52). Liberals cannot surrender their basic principles without becoming illiberal, or just another comprehensive doctrine, as Rawls would say, among other comprehensive doctrines. Yet to secure such freedom and equality, the liberal state must have the power to act against the wishes of at least some of its members. Without order, there cannot be legitimacy, and for that, the state and its principles must have at least enough general support to function in an orderly manner. The state's authority to rule is primarily political, not moral, and it will inevitably be regarded as oppressive and unjust by at least some of the people it governs. Since the defining criteria of legitimacy are not crisply defined, no state can ever be conclusively proven to have legitimate authority, but some can nevertheless make stronger claims than others.

Some readers, especially those who already identify themselves as liberals, may wonder what Sleat's alternative vision of liberalism offers by way of concrete political prescriptions. There can be no doubt that his presentation of liberalism as a 'fighting creed' (p. 140) is markedly at odds with the usual tenor of liberal theory, but this would not amount to much if the difference between liberal realism and more familiar kinds of liberalism consisted only of more hard-nosed rhetoric and pessimism about the possibility of meaningful agreement. But while *Liberal Realism* is far from a comprehensive political theory, Sleat offers several suggestions for what the realistic liberal state can and should do, and some of these are, by liberal lights, provocative and radical. For example, he argues that the state should be prepared to use the education system to instil liberal values in its citizens, if only to the extent necessary to ensure that they do not destabilise the liberal order. The idea here is that legitimacy demands a 'convergence of beliefs' that cannot be expected to arise spontaneously, so some kind of state intervention—albeit intervention of a 'gentler rather than more violent' kind—is needed to raise liberalism above the level of a dominant political force and grant it real, legitimate authority (pp. 159–162). This proposal, though hardly new even in liberal philosophy of education, is nonetheless controversial. It may be objected that illiberal means cannot be used to ensure the survival of a liberal order, since then the victory would be hollow. This objection is far from decisive, and Sleat offers at least a partial answer to it. The questions and objections he leaves unanswered will provide fertile ground for a host of future articles.

Liberal Realism is an engaging, suggestive, perceptive and well-judged contribution to both the growing literature on political realism and the already vast literature on liberalism. Much of its success is owed to Sleat's ability to resist the temptation to overstate his case. The result is a book which will give even those who disagree with the realist critique a reason to reflect on their own principles and ways of doing political theory. For all its claims about what is overlooked or misconstrued in the liberal vision of politics, the book is, in a way, an impassioned defence of political liberalism. That the present prevalence of liberalism and its attendant values is historically contingent and by no means certain to last, argues Sleat, is not a reason for us to give up on it. Nor is it a reason for us to regard it as just one form of politics among others that are, or would be, just as good—at least from someone's point of view. Quite the contrary, it is a reason for us to support it, to view it without illusions, to find for it the strongest and most realistic foundations we can. Liberalism is, writes Sleat, 'nothing short of a magnificent achievement of the human imagination', though one that must be brought down to earth if it is to realise its full potential as a political, not just philosophical, accomplishment (p. 22).

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About the author:

James Wakefield teaches political theory and intellectual history at Cardiff University and Swansea University. He is the author of *Giovanni Gentile and the State of Contemporary Constructivism* and co-editor, with Bruce Haddock, of *Thought Thinking: The Philosophy of Giovanni Gentile*. His research interests are in political and moral theory, and include the ethics of education, liberal perfectionism and the role of the emotions in reasoning.