Inconsistencies in Raymond Geuss' Realist Theory

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Abstract. Contemporary debates in political philosophy have been dominated by the accounts of realism. As one of the most prominent figures in political realism, Raymond Geuss addresses the critical need for an action-guiding theory that could actually be of use in political practice. The Cambridge-based philosopher firmly rejects the idealistic account of politics (which he refers to as the "ethics-first" approach) that derives from Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals*, arguing that it sets a wrong starting point in political theory and therefore succumbs to unrealism. Geuss holds that political theory should strive to understand the "real motivations" of political actors and thus take into account features such as human finitude, the inevitability of conflict and the unequal distribution of power. The present paper points to certain inconsistencies in Geuss' theory, arguing that a plausible conception of political legitimacy cannot be justified in the absence of certain moral norms and principles: How can we define reasonableness in action? To what extent is coercive power acceptable? When should political authority be sanctioned? etc. Moreover, the dismissal of normative standards makes political realism impossible *in praxis*, ignoring the strong tendency towards international cooperation of the last decades.

Key words: Raymond Geuss, critique, political theory, political realism, ideology, rights, justice, power.

In his short, yet very controversial writing *Philosophy and Real Politics*, Raymond Geuss strongly criticizes the neo-Kantian tradition in political philosophy, arguing that it must be replaced with a "realistic" theory that strives to understand the real motivations of the political actors; so far, political theories have been limited to prescribing a set of norms and moral duties according to which individuals should behave, but which are in clear contradiction with the actual political practices. Geuss argues that the derivation of politics from ethics sets a wrong way of theorizing, because it assumes that ethics is separable from other aspects of human life (i.e. interests, aspirations, ideals that motivate certain actions) and ignores the individual through excessive generalization that misinforms (Geuss 2008, 13). Moreover, he even denies the fact that something such as universal ethical principles may exist.

Geuss thinks that a theory of action in general (and in this case of political action) must start with a hermeneutical approach to culture, given the fact that understanding the world from which an individual (political actor) comes from is the *sine qua non* for justifying his actions. For the Cambridge-based philosopher, the assumption that the actions of political agents can and above all must be understood starting from the moral principles available to reason is obsolete. On the contrary, Geuss holds that the main task of political philosophy is to investigate "the real motivations" of the political agents, not to substitute them with a moral equivalent. Furthermore, the finitude of human existence is an important factor in the analysis of the decisions and actions of political agents; subsequently, "politics is not about doing what is good or rational or beneficial *simpliciter*, but about what is good in a particular concrete case by agents with limited

powers and resources" (Geuss 2008, 30-31). Thus, politics cannot be understood as a matter of either good or evil, based on the normative ethical approach, or in the light of certain abstract concepts such as justice or rights, due to the fact that it is "deeply rooted in the multidimensionality of the human society and its continuous evolution" (Havugimana 2018, 178).

In brief, Geuss criticizes political philosophy for being alienated and built upon a fantasy in which we find nothing of what actually happens in the political reality. The American philosopher rejects the idealistic account of politics (which he refers to as the "ethics-first" approach) that derives from Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals*, arguing that it sets a wrong starting point in political theory and therefore succumbs to unrealism. Consequently there is no need for a theory that forces normative commitments (such as the Kantian categorical imperative). On the contrary, a theory that can truly guide the actions of political agents is needed; and such a theory, says Geuss, must start with the analysis of power-relations. Moreover, in so far as political theory takes into account features such as conflict, interests and human finitude, it will reveal that moral values acquire a different understanding when maintaining power is at stake.

Geuss' realist approach starts from the premise that not all the values that govern human interactions are moral values. Political realism places politics on a non-moral normative foundation, thus eliminating the distinction between politics and domination. The present paper sheds light on certain inconsistencies in Geuss' argumentation in favor of political realism. Moreover, we will argue that when we dismiss ethics from political theory and replace it with the concept of power, the very understanding of what politics is becomes problematic.

I. POLITICAL THEORY VS. POLITICAL REALISM

In a nutshell, political realism rejects the political theories derived from Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals*, which purportedly obfuscate political reality by creating an idealized model, governed by the categorical imperative: "act only according to that maxim by which you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law." (1991, 49) By doing so, political realism emphasizes competition and conflict in the pursuit of power, as opposed to cooperation and collective action. Therefore, when political relations are shaped by power, state autonomy and political practice itself become problematic; if normative standards are lacking, there are no political obligations to fulfill.

The tendency towards realism in contemporary philosophy is mainly the result of the so-called "weak thought" typical to the post-modern time as opposed to the rigorously rational way of thinking from the modern period (Vattimo and Rovatti 1983). Contemporary philosophy is built upon the critique of the values instituted in the modern era, based on doctrines such as that of science and technology, the cult of reason and the ideal of freedom in the context of an abstract humanism. Thus, the

hegemony of reason, specific to the modern period, has been replaced with an "affective-hermeneutical thought". Contemporary thinkers regard man as an "emotionally disposed being" (Moraru 2018, 32) rather than as an exclusively rational one, because emotions are the first substrate of mental life, the original form of adherence to the world. This *forma mentis* asserts itself in political philosophy through the tendency towards realism, meaning it ceases to provide a normative foundation. However, this empirical account that prevails in contemporary philosophy can "encourage us to be guided by our emotions at the very time when the abyss between unregulated impulse or undiluted self-interest and moral principles has been so tragically displayed in practice" (Paton 1947, 7).

Geuss objects to the abstract and idealized theories which reduce political practice to applied ethics, ignoring features such as conflict, disagreement and imbalances of power. Hence, the philosopher rejects "the strong Kantian strand that is visible in much contemporary political theory" (2008, 1) and as an alternative to the normative political philosophies the American thinker advances a theory based on four assumptions: that *political philosophy must be realistic*, in other words "to be concerned with how social, economic and political institutions operate in a society at a given time and what determines the actions of human beings in certain circumstances" that *it must recognize the primacy of action* over a set of rules that regulate the decision-making process; that *politics is historically located*, meaning it is indissolubly bound to a cultural context, to human interactions; and that "*politics is more like the exercise of a craft, or art*, than like traditional conceptions of what happens when a theory is applied" (2008, 9-15). In other words, Geuss emphasizes the fact that politics is, above all, a matter of practice.

Geuss strongly criticizes political theories for idealizing to the point where "they prevent a clear understanding of the world" (Morgan 2005, 111) and stresses the need for practical theories. The American philosopher holds that

> the assumption that good/evil is always supposed to trump any other form of evaluation is probably the result of the long history of the Christianisation and then gradual de-Christianisation of Europe, which one need not make; evaluation need not mean moral evaluation, but might include assessments of efficiency, simplicity, perspicuousness, aesthetic appeal, and so on. (2008, 39)

Therefore, manichaeism must be left behind in order to obtain a theory that can be applied in political practice. Political philosophy should focus on describing real-life politics, taking into account the dynamics of human interactions, power relations, interests and conflict. By ignoring these significant features, normative theories succumb to moralism, thus obfuscating political reality. For Geuss, Neo-Kantian political theories are naïve and detached from reality; they have failed in understanding that politics is mainly about the pursuit of power which most often comes before any normative beliefs.

II. INCONSISTENCIES IN GEUSS' THEORY

Geuss firmly rejects the division between descriptive and normative theories, the former supposedly giving just facts and the latter moral principles and values: "the attentive reader will notice that I do not distinguish sharply between a descriptive theory and a pure normative theory" (2008, 16). This comes with no surprise, since his alternative to mainstream political theories "resembles a purely descriptive exercise too closely." (Rossi 2010, 205) Albeit Geuss points to the fact that only by dismissing the distinction between descriptive and normative can we obtain a political theory free of illusion, one might wonder whether this is rather a strategic maneuver meant to conjure away the caducity of his own theory. Also, the philosopher stresses the need for an action-orienting political theory, but can this be achieved merely through description? Even though political realism "has devoted its energies to a 'methodological dispute' with those who see political theory as a subfield of moral philosophy" (Verovšek 2018, 267), this need not mean that it offers a viable alternative, since Geuss himself objects to the fact that one must propose a positive alternative when engaging in the critique of a doctrine (2008, 95). Yet, we are left with the impression that however realistic such a political theory may be, the dismissal of normative principles makes it impossible *in praxis*, ignoring the general tendency of the last decades towards collaboration and collective action. Hence, Geuss' "facts-first" theory might itself succumb to description and not live up to its expectations; or maybe this is the case with a political reality that has degraded to the point where it has become irretrievable. However, even if political actors deliberately dismiss normative standards, it is not the case for political theories to dismiss them as well, since political theories should be shaping reality and not the opposite way.

By dismissing the division between descriptive and normative, Geuss attempts to restructure political philosophy itself, which at its core is normative. Thus far, political philosophy did not seek to describe but, on the contrary, to explain political phenomena and this is only possible by subsuming them into general laws. Political theories show how things *ought* to be, but most often the way they are is ugly and immoral. However, this is hardly a reason for dismissing the standards for political behavior. It is true that sometimes the distinction between facts and values is hazy, but if we think of the facts as means of realization of objectives that are value-based, the vagueness disappears. Or is it that Geuss suggests political philosophy, instead of being a branch of ethics, should rather be a branch of sociology? In other words, that it should be concerned with how people act, casting aside any type of criticism? But then, how can such a theory be action-guiding whilst lacking a normative framework?

Geuss accuses normative political theories for being ideological, but one might ask whether this holds true for political realism as well, which seems to be an attempt of justifying certain ethically unreasonable political practices (i.e. acts of violence, excessive authority, short-term decision-making etc.) by convincing us that in the realm of politics the pursuit of power trumps any normative beliefs. But how can we define reasonableness

in action in the absence of any standards for political behavior? It is worth noting that this question is left unanswered, since Geuss does not offer any specifications in this regard; the normative ground of his theory remains uncertain.

The Geussian critique starts from the (false) premise that there exists something such as a non-ideological place from which to address the very issue of ideology. It seems that Geuss is ignorant to Paul Ricoeur's writings, otherwise he would have taken into account the fact that axiologic neutrality is not achievable, therefore it is impossible to make a non-ideological critique of ideology (Ricoeur 1986, 314-323). Besides, if the idealized ethical model "prevents us from seeing how the real world of politics operates, how did he manage to see his way through it?" (Morgan 2005, 115), Geuss claims that he is able to see what others cannot see, meaning that he can denounce ideology since it is someone else's thought, whilst his own thought has not been perverted by it. Given this, one might wonder if Geuss is being intellectually honest. However the case may be, one thing is sure: his attempt at *Ideologiekritik* is the weakest part of his argumentation, since it hardly provides any reasons to accept his claim that political realism is a non-ideological doctrine. By ignoring the ineluctable aspect of ideology, the philosopher sets an argument from a false premise – that there is a non-ideological place from which to develop a political theory – leading us to believe that such a theory would be more successful than the existing ones.

Apart from this, Geuss implies that ideology is something intrinsically wrong, that its main function is to distort reality; yet once we step outside the Marxist theory, a positive aspect of ideology becomes salient. Aside from projecting a distorted view of reality, ideology also ensures the cohesion of a social group *via* tradition. In other words, ideology is what justifies and mobilizes a historical community: for instance, "The American Declaration of the Rights is the credo of a group and perpetuates its initial energy beyond its effervescence period" (Ricoeur 1986, 307), meaning it is the founding act that establishes a social group, providing its members with a certain self-representation. However, Geuss casts aside any positive function of ideology and criticizes the very concept of human rights. The American philosopher holds that the existence of individual rights is not something to be taken for granted. Consequently, he engages in a historical enquiry of rights, showing that they are nothing but mere inventions of the late Middle Ages, since they cannot be traced any time earlier in the so-called European tradition (Geuss 2008, 65). The philosopher refutes the belief that individual human rights lie at the core of political theories from the simple reason that such a concept is not as natural (is not an *a priori* determination) and indispensable that a society cannot exist without it. By doing so, Geuss aims to reveal the caducity of Nozick's political theory that "actively distracts people from asking other, highly relevant questions by presenting *rights* as the self-evident basis for thinking about politics." (2008, 69) But is this not the case with political realism as well? It is true that when we analyze Nozick's theory in light of the assumptions which Geuss thinks any political philosophy should be built upon, it appears to violate a couple of rules: it ignores the historical dimension of politics by taking

for granted the concept of an "individual right" without any further enquiry; it does not recognize the primacy of action over a set of rules (individual rights), since the very entity that guarantees these rights (the state) is the same that violates them; hence, the theory succumbs to unrealism. Nozick's theory is ideological because it fails to acknowledge the functioning of power and consequently it obfuscates political reality.

The same is the case with Rawls' theory that starts from the premise of the preeminence of justice. Again, Geuss rejects the possibility of an "intuitive conviction of the primacy of justice"; besides, even if it were true that we had such an intuition, the concept would still remain unclear, since there cannot be any certainty that all individuals have the same representation of justice. Rawls' biggest failure is ignoring one of the main features of politics which is the inequality of status (due to unequal power distribution) that makes justice, in the sense of equality, impossible to achieve. Consequently, Rawls' theory ignores the features that actually shape the political world – the ineliminability of conflict and an unequal power distribution – whilst (falsely) assuming that agreement on certain values is possible.

At this point, at least two objections come to mind. First, how come that political theories based upon normative concepts (such as human rights) are ideological in the sense that they prevent us from seeing the "real" world of politics, whilst a descriptive, facts-first theory that is based upon the concept of power is not? On the contrary, we argue that such a theory would be even more ideological, given the fact that its normative grounds are unclear and thus enable any justification for political actions in the pursuit of power. Second, Geuss fails to consider that "political equality rests on the empirical fact of natural human equality" (Fukuyama 2002, 9) and therefore arguing that concepts such as individual human rights and justice do not lie at the core of politics means to challenge the very existence of human nature. By doing so, the philosopher ignores the fact that all individuals, regardless of their status, share a common humanity. It remains uncertain why Geuss holds that "rights-discourse […] is an inherently apolitical way of thinking about politics." (Geuss and Hamilton 2013, 91) Why is it that a rights-discourse stops debates on important political issues such as setting political priorities in conflict situations? Albeit Geuss disapproves of manicheism, he himself seems to suggest that political theories are either idealistic (therefore bad), distracting us from the real problems by making use of ethics and rights language, or realistic (therefore good), focusing on facts whilst acknowledging that "to talk about rights is to take attention away from other important things." (Geuss and Hamilton 2013, 92) It is not clear whether he suggests we should dismiss rights in the sense that one should not make use of them in the context of a realist theory or rather that we should understand rights as one of the many elements embedded in the political process. Yet, one might ask, why is it that individual rights and political facts cannot be combined? Is it that they are so opposite that they offset each other? This question remains open for further research.

Finally, let us discuss the main idea of Geuss' realism, which is that political theory must not be normative (and thus critical) but rather should focus on examining and

describing the political context. The philosopher holds that political theories ought not to prescribe behavior based upon moral norms and principles; on the contrary, the main concept in terms of which political events can be understood is that of power, as it appears from the question posed by Lenin "Who whom?" (кто кого), that is "Who 'does' what to whom for whose benefit?" (2008, 25) Therefore, if political practice, free from universal ethical principles and norms, is reduced to the exercise of power, how can we distinguish between a legitimate and an arbitrary exercise of power? In other words, what exactly justifies the exercise of power in one way or another in the absence of some universal standards for behavior? "To think politically is to think about agency, power, and interests, and the relations among these", Geuss says. (2008, 25) His statement reminds of a famous phrase in the Melian Dialogue related by Thucydides: "right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must."[1] A power such as the one from the Melian Dialogue does not admit ethical considerations, but when it comes to contemporary political power we cannot help but wonder if its exercise is legitimate, if it is right. Political legitimacy is built upon the values that are realized by means of political action, values such as justice: is political power used in a right way? Although Geuss does not completely give up on the idea of justice, he holds that it must be understood in its application in concrete situations, which involve power relations and certain interests. The main failure of ethics-first theories is that it expects political agents to always choose the principle of justice, ignoring the unequal power distribution which makes justice in the sense of equality impossible to achieve. But when choices are made based upon interests, which are so volatile, instead of being guided by the principle of justice, how are we to provide any account for them?

At this point, it seems that Geuss is rather trying to justify the socio-political degradation through a theory that ceases to show how things *ought* to be and starts accepting them the way they *are* (since we cannot derive an "ought" from an "is", we would consequently have a theory lacking a normative framework). Nonetheless, political theories should not succumb to reality; the fact that we are living in a world of poor morality, unequal justice and violated rights is hardly a sufficient reason for dismissing ethics from political theories. In spite of politicians thinking that the state must be based on principles derived from experience (Kant 2006, 67), political philosophy should not cease to be critical and strive to build normative models which, *nota bene*, are meant to provide orientation and a standard for evaluation, not to deceive us by creating the illusion of a perfect world in which all individuals act rationally. In his attempt to focus on the most salient aspects of the political realm (conflict and power relations), Geuss loses sight of the need for normative standards and thus fails to provide anything more than a negative critique of the existing political theories.

Assuming that Geuss' political realism does not completely elude ethics, the means by which to distinguish between legitimate power and pure domination remain uncertain

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1] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War,* chap. XVII, the Melian Dialogue.

and thus the very understanding of what politics is becomes problematic,[2] all the more the philosopher is mostly concerned with pointing what politics is not, but fails to provide a positive definition of it. It can be objected that

> Geuss does not view power as in itself normatively problematic; for him power is a useful concept for analyzing historical and sociological limitations of the perspectives that people can have on themselves and their specific context. This should be read as an attempt to overcome the view of the concept of power as normatively negative, or even as 'poisonous', which prevents its discussion and evaluation beyond the division between legitimate and illegitimate power. (Prinz 2015, 7)

In other words, power should not be evaluated in moral terms, but rather analyzed in concrete situations, revealing the effects it produces. We consider that this argument is not valid, since, in the absence of a normative framework, the exercise of power alone does not lead to an understanding of politics. No doubt that an analysis of the political power-relations in societies would be fruitful in many ways, but we doubt that it could be the foundation of a political theory.

III. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Throughout this paper we shed light on some inconsistencies in Geuss' theory, arguing that his so called "realist" program seems to be impossible to put in practice for at least three reasons. First, it lacks a normative dimension and thus it cannot provide any account for political action. By imposing as a methodological exigency no distinction between normative and descriptive, Geuss' theory seems unable to accomplish its tasks, that is to guide and evaluate political action. Second, it starts from the false premise that there exists a non-ideological place from which to develop a political theory. The philosopher strongly criticizes the neo-Kantian political theories for being ideological in the sense that they draw away attention from the functioning of power, yet his own theory seems to be ideological since it tries to prove that ethics and individual rights are just some negligible factors in the realm of politics. Finally, Geuss' theory does not provide a plausible conception of political legitimacy. By focusing on the analysis of power relations, the philosopher ignores the need for certain tools for distinguishing between a legitimate and an arbitrary exercise of power: How can we define reasonableness in action? To what extent is coercive power acceptable? When should political authority be sanctioned? These questions remain unanswered. Since political legitimacy refers to political obligations, it can only be built upon a set of normative principles. Lacking a firm distinction between good/evil, acceptable/unacceptable, political practice cannot be governed by political realism.

However, the fact that debates in political philosophy are being dominated by the accounts of realism is worrying because it reveals the tendency towards a "post-

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2] We encountered a similar argument in Rozi (2010, 509).

human stage of history." (Fukuyama 2002, 7) In other words, in the absence of certain fundamental values, our very humanity is at risk. Throwing old values overboard without even assimilating new ones eventually means alienating ourselves from our own nature. Therefore, at the end of this paper we are left to reflect upon the contemporary human condition, since it is our duty to lower this problem into the depths of philosophy. At the end of the volume *The Great Disruption*, Francis Fukuyama predicts that only a "return to religiosity" (1999, 249) might be able to restore the wholeness of life.

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