Liberal Realism:

The Fate of Freedom in an Age of Uncertainty

1. Research Questions

The rise of international terrorism and global economic insecurity in recent years has exposed a troubling void at the heart of academic liberalism. The relative political tranquillity, security and prosperity of the 1990s provided a context in which a certain kind of political philosophy could flourish in universities. The central preoccupations of this philosophy (associated primarily with the figure of John Rawls) were problems of justice in the distribution of affluence and the negotiation of disagreement among the reasonable citizens of liberal democracies.

The upheavals of the last decade have created a climate of uncertainty and cast doubt on the background of peace, stability and consensus about liberal values that this philosophy had assumed, making both its methods and its conclusions seem unworldly. In the explosion of interest in the new political questions arising in this climate of uncertainty (concerning the ethics and politics of terrorism, torture, risk), one fundamental issue has been neglected. How are liberal societies to survive in an age of uncertainty? If the authority of liberal values depends on a background of peace, stability and consensus, what becomes of those values in a world of conflict, fragility and discord?

That is the central problem which this project seeks to address. Our research explores the resources within the liberal tradition for developing a liberal political

philosophy for these new and uncertain times: an account of the normative underpinnings of liberal political institutions and values that is compatible with the acknowledgement of profound moral conflict and insecurity. It addresses the following questions:

1. How can the resources of political philosophy help us better to understand the nature of modern conflict and insecurity?

2. Are liberal assumptions about the legitimacy of liberal values and institutions adequate to the realities of disagreement and dissensus in modern democratic societies?

3. Is it possible to ground a compelling defence of liberal institutions and practices by appealing to negative moral experiences of cruelty, injustice and vulnerability? Or only to more pragmatic considerations?

4. What can a realistic liberalism contribute to debates about toleration, the proper balance of liberty and security and the future of multiculturalism in democratic societies?

2. Research Context

In 2006, Tony Blair argued that 'our idea of liberty is not keeping pace with change in reality' (Blair, 2006). His remarks reflect widespread suspicion that traditional liberal attitudes cannot survive confrontation with conflict and insecurity. This suspicion has gone largely unchallenged by the liberal academy and the silence has been keenly felt in the experience of Western democracies which have witnessed the steady erosion of civil liberties in the name of national security. The liberal voice in public debate is portrayed as a voice of sentimentality, ill-suited to our current predicament.

This has proved a remarkably effective political tactic, its success due in part to the failure of liberal scholars to articulate an intellectually credible basis for the political claims of their activist counterparts.

The realist challenge to liberalism is now well-established in the literature. Associated with Raymond Geuss, Chantal Mouffe, Bonnie Honig and others, this challenge posits an irreconcilable opposition between the 'ideal' liberal tradition and the new political reality. We must abandon the liberal project, these critics insist, and begin anew. Little has been done to answer that challenge. One response, increasingly prominent, is to propose a 'non-ideal' liberalism. The proponents of this approach (like Adam Swift and Colin Farrelly) see no fundamental incompatibility between liberalism and political reality, but do believe that the task of theorising the implementation of liberalism was neglected by the likes of Rawls and remains to be completed.

We find the response of non-ideal liberals unsatisfactory; it fails to take the realist challenge seriously enough. The failure of ideal liberalism is not a failure to address problems of implementation – it is a far deeper failure associated with the moralistic style of political thought to which liberals (ideal and non-ideal) have become attached. However, and unlike the anti-liberal realists, we believe that Rawls's work, and the broader liberal tradition to which his work was a contribution, is of the greatest continuing importance. Instead of repudiating that tradition, we aim to extend it.

One possible response to the realist challenge has been neglected. In a climate of uncertainty about the moral foundations of liberal institutions and practices, Judith Shklar argued for a negative turn in political thought that would find the justification for liberal norms not in positive notions of justice or the good, but rather in felt experiences of injustice and cruelty (e.g. Shklar, 1989). Shklar's 'liberalism of fear' constitutes a distinctive intervention: in common with the other realist approaches, it takes its cue from political realities, but, *pace* anti-liberal realists, it claims to find in those realities the justification for liberalism.

While Shklar's position has been elaborated by several notable philosophers (including Stuart Hampshire, Bernard Williams and John Gray), it had limited impact in the secure and prosperous conditions of the late twentieth century and receded to the margins of debate. In present conditions, the liberalism of fear acquires a renewed significance. Taking Shklar's theory as a starting point, we will endeavour to articulate, from within the liberal tradition, a defensible moral foundation for liberalism in the real world.

The project is an emerging research topic that dovetails with the current strategic priorities of the UK research councils. Specifically, it connects with the cross-council 'Global Uncertainties: Security for all in a Changing World' programme, addressing key programme themes of radicalised violence, insecurity, injustice and conflict. This signals the contemporary importance of our project. The project will also be of interest to political actors and policymakers. We argue that liberal activists have been politically disadvantaged by the academy's failure to provide a compelling foundation for liberal values. We want to repair that failure and would make our

findings available, through appropriate media, to political practitioners and organisations such as think tanks and NGOs.

3. Research Methods

The Liberal Realism project is distinctive in integrating a number of discrete subject specialisms within political philosophy. The project moves between abstract 'ideal theory', operating on the interface between moral and political philosophy, and more concrete and applied questions of political realism and political ethics. To each of these elements, the project adds a historical dimension, tracing the roots of realism in the history of liberal political thought. It would be impossible for a single institution adequately to cover all these bases and so it is necessary to develop a wider research structure to pursue the project.

Our intention is to establish a unified centre of research excellence in political philosophy among the departments of politics at the Universities of Sheffield and York and the school of POLIS at the University of Leeds (White Rose Association for Political Philosophy – WRAPP). The liberal realism project will constitute the first stage in the foundation and development of that centre. Combining the resources of the White Rose universities provides the breadth of expertise necessary for us to fulfil the project's objectives. In Leeds, the Theory and Application research group, convened by Dr Edyvane, is an interdisciplinary group that focuses on the application of philosophy to political questions and benefits from the broad expertise of the School in the areas of politics, development and security studies. In Sheffield, the Centre for Political Thought and Ideologies, run by Dr Sleat, provides a forum in which academics and research students approach political issues and concepts from

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a variety of different philosophical traditions. In York, the department of politics hosts the Morrell Centre for Toleration, which specialises in the exploration of modern and historical problems of toleration. Uniting the three research groups will create a unique and innovative forum in which to engage comprehensively with problems in political philosophy that have conventionally been tackled in a more isolated and one-dimensional manner.

The network will engage with and respond to the research questions by producing a series of 24 discussion papers that will be presented in research meetings to be held throughout the project's duration (8 a year) and rotated between the three institutions. Discussion papers in the first year will focus on research questions 1 and 2, using political philosophy to make sense of modern conflict and insecurity and assessing contemporary liberalism in the light of our findings. In the second year, we will turn to research question 3 and the challenge of developing a realist defence of liberalism. In the third year, we address question 4, and seek to establish the implications of our findings for practical political problems. Four of the meetings each year will involve external speakers, three academic and one non-academic. Since the purpose of the project meetings is to develop new ideas and approaches, we will invite newer contributors to the debate who will provide fresh perspectives on, and novel solutions to, the problems under discussion.

References

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- Shklar, J. (1989) 'The Liberalism of Fear' in Rosenblum (ed.) *Liberalism and the Moral Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press).