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# NO REST FOR THE WICKED POLITICAL REALISM AND THE INEVITABILITY OF CONFLICT

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The underlying idea is that implementing forms of “civilized” politics is desirable as well as feasible. And, as far as the Italian political system is concerned, it is also urgently needed, since the system appears to be poorly prepared to deal with the challenges emerging in many policy areas: from welfare state reform to the governance of immigration, from the selection criteria in education and in public administration to the regulation of ethically sensitive issues.

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Conflict, Pluralism, Disagreement, Political Realism

## ABSTRACT

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This paper tackles the issue of conflict within the framework of political realism. It aims to define what conflict is and to show that it is inevitable. I put forward a definition of conflict that pulls together two strands present in the literature: the presence of incompatible preferences and the disposition to impose them against the resistance of others. This second element is particularly important as it allows to neatly distinguish conflict from other similar concepts, like pluralism or disagreement among which it is sometimes confused, and to understand better its subcategories, violence and war. From these analysis, I extrapolate four significant features of conflict, which are appropriately highlighted by this definition: the relation to politics, the connection to violence, its neutrality to content and its unilateral emergence. Given its unilateral emergence, as long as even few people exhibit incompatible preferences and the disposition to impose them, conflicts would spontaneously emerge. This support the conclusion that conflicts, appropriately understood, are permanent features of the human world. Finally, I show how this analysis reflects on political philosophy. While the mainstream view of Rawlsian liberalism tends to underestimate the inevitability of conflict, the tradition of political realism captures it in a more satisfying way.

## NO REST FOR THE WICKED

### POLITICAL REALISM AND THE INEVITABILITY OF CONFLICT

CARLO BURELLI

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper has two aims: first, to discuss the concept of conflict within the field of political philosophy in general and political realism in particular. Secondly, it seeks to clarify how conflict, appropriately defined, is a necessary and inevitable feature of politics. While this concept is often brought up in academic literature, it has rarely been analytically defined.

I start §2 by defining conflict as the situation characterized by (1) two or more actors (institutions, individuals or groups) having diverse preferences (due to interests, values, identities...), and (2) at least one of them prefers imposing his preference ‘against the resistance of the other party’.

In §3, I show how adopting such a definition allows to distinguish conflict from similar concepts commonly employed in political philosophy (pluralism, disagreement, violent struggle, and war). Pluralism for example, restricts (1) to values and does not imply (2). John Rawls’s ‘reasonable pluralism’, for example, assumes (2) away insofar as his justification is aimed at reasonable individuals, while *modus vivendi*’s ‘radical pluralism’ often implicitly accepts it. Disagreement does not fit (2) because people are supposed to prefer finding out the truth of the matter. Violent struggles are a specific form of conflict because they restrict their means to violence. Similarly, war restricts (1) to institutional actors and to organized violence.

In §4, I describe a few interesting implications of conflict that are clarified through this definition. First, not all conflicts are political. Second, the use of violence is contingent, although always potential. Third, conflicts are content-neutral: they cannot be resolved by proving the enemy wrong. Fourth, conflicts may arise unilaterally: only one actor needs to exhibit the preference for imposing his view, for others to be in a situation of conflict.

I claim in §5 that conflicts are permanent features of politics by arguing that there is no way to implement a social structure which consistently avoids (1) and (2). Contrasts of preferences (1) are broadly acknowledged in academic literature, both in political philosophy and in social and political sciences. The preference to prevail (2) is not as unanimously recognized, but due to the unilateral emergence of conflict, we only need it to be possible, for conflicts to be inevitable. We should then be sceptical about accounts of politics which disregard, moralize, or assume away conflicts. The biblical quote that serves as a title to this paper: ‘no rest for the wicked’ (Isaiah 48:22), is meant to illustrate precisely that conflict is an everlasting companion to men.

I then consider with §7 that this account of conflict helps clarifying why political idealism as a philosophical approach is bound to misrepresent political reality. Here I briefly reflect on the account put forward by John Rawls and argue that although he intends his theory to be a ‘realistic utopian’ (1999, 11), he ultimately falls prey to some severe idealized assumptions.

Finally, I conclude in §6 how the theoretical account I outlined is well supported by the literature of political realism. Political realism as a philosophical tradition, I claim, has always stressed the inevitability of conflict and is quite sympathetic with the view that politics regards dealing with conflict.

## 2. DEFINING CONFLICT

Surprisingly, a clear definition of conflict seems to be lacking in political theory. A survey of the literature shows that, while this concept frequently comes up when issues like struggle, violence, pluralism, disagreement and war are discussed, it is rarely defined and explicitly addressed. In this paper I claim that conflict is a defining feature of politics, and I attempt to provide a conceptual definition that would allow to properly capture the distinctiveness of conflict against other analogous concepts.

I propose to define conflict as a situation characterized by (1) two or more actors (be they institutions, individuals or groups) that have incompatible preferences (due to their interests, values, identities...) and (2) at least one of them intends to carry out his preference against the resistance of one or more of the others.

This definition combines two elements present in the literature. First, the widespread intuition that conflict expresses some kind of incompatibility. This intuition is widely assumed in political science: ‘Conflict not only relates to physical interaction; but also to any form of disagreement about ends to be pursued’ (Bealey 1999, 79); ‘A conflict exists when two people wish to carry out acts which are mutually inconsistent’ (Nicholson 1992, 11). There is also a clear affinity to the common understanding of this notion in sociology: ‘[conflict] is in reality the way to remove the dualism and to arrive to some form of unity, even if through annihilation of one of the parties’

(Simmel 1904, 490); ‘Deep inside every conflict lies a contradiction, something standing in the way of something else’ (Galtung 1996, 70). 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, 38). While the first element is commonly acknowledged in the literature, it is only when it is coupled with the second one that the distinctive nature of conflict is captured.

### 3. DISTINGUISHING CONFLICT

Adopting such a definition allows one to distinguish conflict from other concepts among which it is sometimes confused: pluralism, disagreement, violent struggle, and war. Let’s see how conflict is different and why this definition captures a crucial element of politics.

Pluralism is a term that political philosophers usually employ when they refer to the plurality of values of modern societies. Although in some cases they are treated as synonymous, conflict is, on this view, a distinct notion. While we observe that - empirically - cases of pluralism seem to produce conflicts, this is not always necessarily the case. Conflicts are generated only when the mere contrast of views, which characterize a pluralistic society, couples with the willingness to impose one’s view onto others. The mix-up among the two situations may be explained by a selection bias, as pluralism is most visible when it turns into conflict. On a theoretical level, however, the two concepts are quite distinct. Confusing pluralism and conflict is a mistake, because there are two significant differences among the two situations. First, pluralism restricts the sources of conflict to worldviews and values. It does not usually comprehend cases where only direct material interests are irreconcilable. Conflict, on the contrary, can emerge even among people expressing incompatible interests within the same value system (e.g. two businessmen competing for profit). The definition I proposed is agnostic about the roots of the contrast of preferences: it might be values, it might be identities, or it might be interests, insofar as conflicts emerge from incompatible preferences, regardless of their origins. Secondly, and more importantly, pluralism only captures the first element of conflict, the contrast of preferences, but it needs not entail the second one: the preference for imposing one’s view. Rawls, for example, numbers among the fact of politics ‘reasonable pluralism’ (Rawls 1993, 24), which is the kind of pluralism experienced by reasonable individuals. Given that the most important feature of reasonable citizens is the ‘willingness to propose and honour fair terms of cooperation’ (Boettcher 2004, 604), it seems that by definition they would not try to prevail on one other. Reasonable pluralism, on this account, is precisely pluralism without conflict. Challenging Rawls, some political philosophers choose to employ a more radical conception of pluralism (Gray 2002). This comes closer to the definition of conflict I have given, but it is still



unsatisfactory as it is mainly derived negatively in an effort to expand Rawls's position. Radical pluralism is pluralism extended to unreasonable individuals. While the preference for imposing one's view is definitively part of unreasonable individuals, my definition spells out more precisely that this is the feature of unreasonableness which results in conflict. Any conflict of interests within the same value system is an example of conflict not reducible to pluralism. The conflict between firms and unions, for instance, may prove to be such an example, when they try to impose on one another an agreement advantageous to the material interests of their respective side. In such case, they share the worldview and values (material welfare), but they disagree based on their interests and they try to impose them on one another. Conceptions of conflicts that focus only on the conflict of preferences, and fail to emphasize the willingness to impose one's preferences, are bound to confuse conflict with mere pluralism. The definition I propose is helpful insofar as it clarifies why conflict is different from pluralism and under which conditions pluralism turns into conflict.

Conflict, as a political concept, also needs to be kept distinct from the notion of disagreement. A disagreement involves incompatible preferences as well, but disagreeing actors are not trying to prevail on one another, they are instead trying to figure out what the truth of the matter is. At the most general level, 'all [disagreement] equates to what strictly speaking is the absence of agreement' (Besson 2005, 19). Disagreement is characterized by incompatible views, but the actors involved are willing to reconsider their views if they are persuaded by evidence and arguments, and may even embrace the opposite view if they are led to believe that it is true. This may seem unlikely to happen in political disputes, but the reason is that these are more akin to conflicts than to disagreements. As I anticipated in my critical remarks to Waldron, his notion of disagreement is 'in good faith' (1999, 93): between people who have different, but sincere, views about what ought to be done. In Waldron's view, those who disagree care more about which of the contrasting preference truly ought to prevail, than to impose their own. A conflict, on the contrary, is hardly swayed by the force of reasons alone. Although that might happen, more often arguments are ineffective. Consider the concept of class struggle (Marx 1992); this is a classic example of conflict not reducible to disagreement, as each side wants to prevail on the other, and is not going to be swayed by arguments. Even if there were a truth of the matter to be found, and it could be objectively determined in some way, the conflicting actors would not be placated by it, insofar as they are not trying to find the true, but only to impose their view (right or wrong) on the other. Thus, here again, if one adopts a conception of conflict which does not stress the second element, one will fail to appreciate how it is different from disagreement. Disagreement is also characterized by incompatible views, but, in such a situation, actors are willing to reconsider their views if they are persuaded by evidence and

arguments, and potentially even embrace the opposite view if they are led to believe it to be true.

Conflict is sometimes conceived as violent struggle (Mouffe 2005), i.e. a contrast of preferences settled by violent means. This notion, however, is too restrictive. Violence is certainly often a part of conflict, but one that not all conflicts necessarily take. While it is true, that violent conflicts are the most acute ones, and thus the ones we are most likely to notice, they are not the only ones. There are different reasons why conflicts may not turn violent. In some instances, the actor's preference for having it his way might not be fiery enough to incline them to the use of violence. In some cases, violence might simply be too costly for them, as they could be at a disadvantage against the other party or they could both be subjected to another arbitrating power. Both actors may also hold moral beliefs, which classify violence as non-permissible means to conflict. Conflict could thus take many forms, even non-violent ones. An institutional conflict, for example, is a kind of conflict, which is non-violent, and yet one that can threaten the order upon which a society is built. As long as one of the contenders wants to prevail, a contrast would still be a case of conflict even when there is no violence. Conflicts however always carry the risk of potentially turning violent, as soon as the variables that keep them peaceful change. If conflict is kept non-violent by an arbitrating institution, for example, it may become violent as soon as that institution is weakened. If a conflict is prevented from becoming violent because only the weakest contender wills to impose his view but cannot actually do so, a change in the balance of power might prompt a turn to violence.

On a similar note, conflict is a more comprehensive category than war, although it sometimes is used in this sense. Traditionally, war counts as a very specific kind of conflict: one that restricts our definition to a specific kind of actor (sovereign institutions) and *modus operandi* (organized violence)<sup>1</sup>. However, it does capture in a very clear fashion the spirit of my conception of conflict, despite restricting them in scope. Consider the most classical definition, that of Carl von Clausewitz. He describes war as 'an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will' (Clausewitz 2008, 14). This view clearly expresses what I presented as the second element. A mere contrast of preferences among nations is not enough to prompt a situation of war, but it needs to be coupled with the intention to impose one's view against others. However, the notion of conflict cannot be reduced to that of war for two reasons. First, as previously argued, it focuses only on 'force' and organized violence as its specific means. Secondly, it restricts the possible actors to States or other institutional entities. While wars among states are the most prominent examples of political

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<sup>1</sup> Contemporary scholars try to expand this traditional view, to incorporate some non-state actors like terrorist organizations.

conflicts, because of their unparalleled potential for destructive violence, conflicts can also occur among individual actors, or non-state organization, as long as they have incompatible preferences, and one of them is willing to impose on the other. Civil wars are also instances of conflict, notwithstanding the fact that the conflicting actors are factions within the state. Indeed, within this conception of conflict, we could also make sense of the new kinds of asymmetric wars, which usually have a traditional state facing non-state organizations.

As I have tried to show, this more general and neutral definition of conflict distinguishes two dimensions along which other similar concepts could be classified, thus it allows to better grasp political reality. It is indifferent about who the agents are (individuals, groups, institutions...), about why their points of view are incompatible (interests, values, identities), and about what modes of action they engage in. What matters is only that they hold incompatible positions and that one of them is willing to carry out his will at the expenses of others. So conceived, conflict appears different from pluralism, disagreement, violent struggles and wars and by adopting this definition it is possible to see exactly why.

#### 4. FEATURES OF CONFLICT

The proposed definition allows us to distinguish several interesting features of conflicting situations.

First, not every conflict is political<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, not every value or interest make a claim on public coercion, not all conflicting agents choose to try to enforce their will through the state's apparatus. While doing so might be a viable strategy for trying to impose our will on others without using violence ourselves, one might pursue other ways to do it. Trade unions, for example, may turn to politics to ask for new labour laws but often decide to organize a strike to make businesses conform to their will. A religious institution may lobby in favour of laws against abortion, or it might try to persuade actual doctors to use their right of conscientious objection. Sometimes it is assumed that conflicts are only dangerous if they turn to politics. Contrary to this, all conflicts may potentially turn violent if left politically unchecked, and thus all conflicts are dangerous in virtue of their involving 'a real possibility' of violence (Schmitt 2007, 33).

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<sup>2</sup> I am using 'political' in Weber sense, whereby: 'what "politics" means for us is to strive for a share of power or to influence the distribution of power, whether between states or between the groups of people contained within a state (Weber 2013, 33).

This leads us to a second interesting feature, which regards the relation between conflict and violence. According to the definition I have given, the use of violence is only an accidental property of conflict. One that – it is true – is always potentially present, but one that does not encompass the whole realm of this concept. Conflict theory of sociology for example directly links conflict and violence: ‘Above all else, there is conflict because violent coercion is always a potential resource, and it is zero-sum sort’ (Collins 1975, 59). Violence is one of the many means one can employ to impose his view on another. It is an effective, yet costly one. However, it is not the only one. As previously observed, there are cases in which the option of using violent means is out of the question. Either it is impossible, or it is too costly, or again we are simply not willing to go that far. In all these situation however, conflicts could still emerge insofar as people could still be willing to impose their view on others, even if they could not use violence to do it. Thus, it could be observed that even if one were to consider violence as necessarily bad, conflicts need not be referred to as negative. Weber for example emphasizes that conflict opens up new possibilities and can thus be considered beneficial as a true motor of change. Economic competitions and courts of justice are two examples of positive conflicts, which are sometimes put forward. Indeed, these are very specific kinds of conflicts and they are only good insofar as they follow precise rules, which are laid down and enforced by the public authority, which prevents their potential escalation towards violence. If I were to use corruptions, blackmails or threats in either of these, one would not keep considering them good. They are good insofar as they can be contained in such a way. Indeed, economic science defines rather rigidly under what conditions we have perfect competition and laws establish clearly what conducts fall outside the legalized conflict of the courts of law.

Another important feature of my definition of conflict is its content-neutrality. It does not really matter why a conflict emerges, according to which opposing values, interests or identities. We cannot resolve the conflict by referring to truth or rightness, because the actors care more about imposing their will than about questioning it to see if they are really justified in doing so. As Stuart Hampshire recalls ‘Machiavelli and Hobbes famously insisted that political conflicts are not finally and reliably resolved on a rational level by adversary argument, because they normally also bring with them a struggle for power in the state or in the society, which often overwhelms rational procedures’ (Hampshire 2001, 66). It can thus be a mistake to overstate the importance of reasons in conflict resolution. Indeed, one might go as far as saying that all considerations of content misinterpret the nature of conflict, because conflict is not about the discordant preferences, but about the willingness to impose them, whatever they are. Somewhat similarly, Schmitt defines his famous ‘friend-enemy’ opposition as being irreducible to other distinctions, like good or bad, or indeed right or wrong. Once we enter a relation of conflict, we know – by

definition – that the will to prevail is weighted more than the will to truth. One cannot resolve a conflict by proving his enemy wrong. If it truly is a conflict, and not a simple matter of disagreement, others would not be swayed by considerations of content. As Robert Nozick observes there are two different possible dispositions: either both parties judge ‘wrong decision worse than conflict with those on the other side’ or at least one of them believes that ‘conflict is better than losing the issue’ (Nozick 1974, 98).

The most important feature of the definition I adopted is probably that the emphasis on the unilateral triggering of conflicts. While the discordance of preferences requires two or more actors to have different opinions, only one of them needs to exhibit the preference to impose his view on others in order for a situation of conflict to arise. You may get caught in a situation of conflict even without exhibiting the preference to impose your will yourself. You may prefer to resolve the contrast by debating the matter to find out who is actually right or by bargaining a mutually agreeable solution. However, in order for content-related reasons to be effective, the other party needs to have the same disposition to find the truth or to seek an agreement. Whether or not you want to be in a situation of conflict is irrelevant, if someone else wants to impose his view on you. Insisting that ‘the most effective way to deal with human conflicts is to reason them out’ (Dennes 1946, 344) is a very dangerous attitude in politics, as it fundamentally misinterprets the nature of conflict. Both the intentions of the other party and their ability to unilaterally trigger a conflict are not assessed correctly in such situations.

## **5. THE INEVITABILITY OF CONFLICT**

If our definition is sensible, I will suggest that conflicts are inevitable by showing that there is no way to move to a situation where the two conflict-inducing conditions are not present. I argue that there seem to be, at the current time, no way to arrange a society in a way that avoids the emergence of contrasting interests, values or identities among actors, nor to consistently restrain actors that exhibit a desire to assert his will against the resistance of others.

Let us start with the first feature of our definition: the presence of divergent preferences. There is in different scientific literatures extensive evidence for this phenomenon. Just in the field of political philosophy, the discussion of pluralism and disagreement presents ample consensus on the fact that values diverge dramatically inside any society. Also, a brief survey of the literature in social and political sciences tells us that the interplay between contrasting interests is widespread and bound to raise conflicts. Simmel for example claims that ‘a group which is entirely centripetal

and harmonious [...] is not only impossible empirically, but it would also display no essential life-process and no stable structure' (Simmel 1904, 491). Another scholar, Ralf Dahrendorf explicitly argues that 'social conflict is ubiquitous' (Dahrendorf 1959, 208). History as well provide a good testimony of the high variability of values among societies, both geographically and diachronically.

To assert that conflicts are an ever-present condition of the social and political world, however, we need to consider whether there is a way to escape it. Rawls himself, when he discusses the fact of pluralism, states that contrasting views are 'not a mere historical condition that may soon pass away', and one comprehensive view can be 'maintained only by the oppressive use of state power' (Rawls 1993, 36–37). His argument is moral: only the impermissible means of an undesirable amount of force might end disagreement. The argument may be pressed further by claiming that even dramatic amounts of force would not actually enforce a single value system, but only the appearance of it. Locke's observation that it is pointless to impose a religion, because faith cannot be enforced, could be extended to support this point (Locke 2011). First, it is not possible to consciously choose to believe something or to like something, whatever the incentive system in place. As Parfit puts it: 'if some whimsical despot threatens to kill me unless, one minute from now, I want to be killed, I could not choose to have this desire' (Parfit 2011, 47). Moreover, even if it were possible, since pure matters of conscience escape surveillance, repression can only intervene on our actions, not on our wants or beliefs, which remain beyond what can be observed by the state. Thus, the differences in interests, values and identities, which generate the contrast of will, cannot be eliminated by coercion and its threat. One can surely modify how people express their wills, by banning actions associated to them from the public sphere and employing constant surveillance. These discordant views, however, would still be present, if only unexpressed. Thus, once the 'intolerable amount of force' is relaxed, different points of views are going to remerge again, since they were never truly eliminated but only locked away.

It is true that there are psychological mechanisms that operate at the level of conscience, like adaptive preference forming or psychological conditioning (Elster 1985). Even if extreme coercion were to generate widespread adaptive preferences, this would hardly be the case for all the citizens. Another way in which one might try to dispose of dissonant ideas is through high social pressure, which is arguably what communities did (Tönnies 2001). However, here too is hard to see how it could be universally successful in rooting out all kinds of deviances, as opposed to just hiding them from sight. It is true that all these mechanisms have some degree of efficacy in increasing homogeneity. But what is key is that in order to dispose of conflict completely, they need to do so in a highly consistent way. In fact, due to the unilateral rising of conflict, it is enough that a few key actors exhibit this disposition for a

conflict to be ignited. This means that the elimination of the plurality of different preferences needs to be quasi-universal, and thus currently no envisageable path seem to lead to such an outcome.

Let's now inquire whether the second element of conflict, the inclination to impose one's view on others, is a permanent feature of the political world. If just the first element is inevitable, then this would only prove the inevitability of pluralism or disagreement. In fact, we need both element (1) and (2) conjunctly to attest the inevitability of conflict. Here again, the fourth feature of conflict (its unilateral rising), means that the argument is not required to show that all, or even many, actors are willing to impose their preferences against other. Even if few people have this dangerous tendency, conflicts are likely to emerge. Thus, the only safe way to disarm all conflicts would be to live in a world where nobody tries to force his will on others.

This disposition to impose one's preferences is not as ubiquitously acknowledged in the literature. Indeed, idealistic political philosophers usually downplay this element, by emphasizing moral progress and the potential for reform and education in the nature of men, which are thought to be workable paths towards a world without such impositions. Political realists, on the contrary, hold the opposite opinion on this issue. Authors like Thucydides (2009), Machiavelli (2010), Hobbes (Hobbes 2009), Nietzsche (Kirkland 2010), Marx (1992) emphasize this unchangeable dimension of human nature. The emphasis on the acquisition of power in realist literature comes precisely from admitting that our dealings with others always conceal a potential for prevarication. This negative anthropology is not assumed to be universal, only present in some, even few, of the relevant actors. Given the unilateralism of conflict, prudence is enough to induce preparations against conflict. Rational anticipation of the aggressiveness of others leads to strategic aggression from ourselves. As Hobbes puts it: 'that men are evil by nature, follows not from this principle; for though the wicked were fewer than the righteous, yet because we cannot distinguish them, there is a necessity of suspecting, heeding, anticipating, subjugating, self-defending, ever incident to the most honest, and fairest condition'd' (Hobbes 1991, 5). Given that only few need to exhibit it, this disposition would need to be completely suppressed in order for conflicts to be eliminated. However, given that there seem to be no way to dispose completely of this tendency, it seems plausible that there will always be someone trying to force his view against the resistance of others.

Thus, if we accept that (1) and (2) can never be completely eliminated, we must conclude that conflicts cannot be 'displaced' either (Honig 1993). This does not mean that they cannot be controlled or contained, only that their existence is bound to persist. I will now inquire to what degree current philosophical paradigms do justice to this fact.

## 6. CONFLICT AND POLITICAL IDEALISM

The mainstream tradition of Rawlsian liberalism is sometime criticised as ‘high-liberalism’ (Galston 2010, 385), ‘moralism’ (Williams 2005), or ‘ethics-first’ (Geuss 2008, 1). Its alleged fault would be precisely to deny or underestimate the potential of conflict in human society, and its consequences on the way we should think about politics. Rawls is the main culprit of this charge, not because he was the most radical in his mistake, but because he was the most successful.

Rawls thinks that the emergence of a stable cooperative order among contrasting theories of the good is indeed the main problem of political philosophy in a democratic society. He explicitly declares that ‘its practical role arise[s] from divisive political conflict and the need to settle the problem of order’ (Rawls 2001, 1). While in his introduction to *Political Liberalism* he raises the issue regarding the wars of religion and Weimar’s republic, he does not address it in his philosophical discussion as his focus lingers instead on reasonable pluralism.

Rawls shares a realistic starting point when he asserts in *Justice as Fairness* that: ‘a democratic society is not and cannot be a community, where by a community I mean a body of persons united in affirming the same comprehensive, or partially comprehensive, doctrine’ (Rawls 2001, 3). Given our cognitive limitations regarding political problems, i.e. the ‘burdens of judgment’ (Rawls 2001, 36), no common idea of the good can be unquestionably established and thus pluralism is the result of the natural operations of human reason.

However, Rawls thinks that this does not affect our capacity to reach a settlement about a shared conception of the right. A realist like Galston concedes that this theoretical commitment is a fruitful one, however, he believes that it is not coherently pursued along his argument: ‘Rawls is partly right: under conditions of pluralism, agreement on living well is not to be expected. But shifting focus from the good to the right doesn’t help: agreement on justice is not to be expected either’ (Galston 2010, 391).

Rawls is indeed not too distant from political realism in this moderate scepticism, when he argues that the burdens of judgments weight on our epistemic ability to reach rational consensus over the good. He then goes on to claim, however, that a similar consensus can nonetheless be reached over what is right.

Yet this critique from Galston is not quite correct. In fact, Rawls does not refer to pluralism but to reasonable pluralism, as a basis for shared conception of the right.



An agreement on justice is to be expected of reasonable individuals. However, political realism sees this very restriction to reasonable individuals as an unrealistic caveat, which excludes a large portion of actual conflict. The ‘facts’ of moralism appear to be normatively twisted from the start.

Religious pluralism, for example, is sometimes unreasonable and purely based on one’s faith. When this is the case, it is not admitted under this caveat. However, such religious disagreement is a simple fact of the world. A fact, moreover which requires our attention here and now. If a political theory excludes religious pluralism, then it confines itself to the kind of pluralism, which is most uninteresting: that which is not radical enough to ignite conflicts.

If a political theory does not worry about unreasonable pluralism, it is bound to be ineffective. In fact, reasonable pluralism assumes away the possibility of conflict, since the status quo is already moralized. Conflicts sprang when among opposite points of view, an actor wishes to impose his own. Clearly, Rawlsian reasonable individual would never do that, given that they are willing to propose and abide to fair terms of cooperation. No real conflicts are admitted in Rawls’s system. However, conflicts do arise in the real world, where unreasonableness often affects even democratic citizens.

Given Rawls’s fact of oppression (Rawls 1993, 37), the use of enforcement is deemed the wrong solution to pluralism. Gray suggests that it might be the only one, when he considers the apt example of religious freedom in Singapore (Gray 2002, 112). While deep religious disagreement endangered political stability, a solution was found in the restriction of religious freedom. The solution admitted freedom of cult while enforcing a ban on proselytising; this reduced the amount of interaction between conflicting religious systems and as such reduced the amount of people willing to impose their view on others. This solution was not ideal, but it did preserve the maximum amount of religious freedom compatible with political stability. This is an unreasonable (in the Rawlsian sense, but presumably not in the ordinary one) solution because it is a restriction by public force of one of the most basic freedoms – freedom of speech. However, it was a necessary one, given that the harsh reality of religious pluralism threatened to spring many potentially violent conflict, a deeper evil that moralism tends to underestimate.

## **7. CONFLICT AND POLITICAL REALISM**

Contrary to Rawlsian liberalism, political realists characteristically stress the role of conflict and its inevitability. It may lay dormant, but there is always a potential for disorder springing from natural human dispositions. This is what Stuart Hampshire

evocatively calls the Heracleitean picture, where ‘every soul is always the scene of conflicting tendencies and of divided aims and ambivalences, and correspondingly, our political enmities in the city or state will never come to an end while we have diverse life stories and diverse imaginations’ (Hampshire 2001, 5).

The persistence of conflict is indeed the oldest theme in political realism and it is a very common issue since the classics. Starting from Thucydides, the tendency of human beings to conflict is identified as one of the key elements on the political sphere (Reeve 1999). Moreover, this recognition is presented as something that is persistent, that we won’t be able to root out even if we want to. For this reason, he claims that his ‘History of the Peloponnesian War’ is a ‘permanent legacy’ because ‘what happened [...], such is the human condition, will happen again at some time in the same or a similar pattern’ (Thucydides 2009, 12). Machiavelli, to consider another example, notoriously claims that every city contains a conflict between the aristocrats and the people: ‘they do not consider that in every republic are two diverse humors, that of the people and that of the great’ (Machiavelli 2009, 16). Hobbes is probably the most extreme in stressing the prominence of conflict in human affairs, and he goes as far as saying that ‘during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called Warre’ (Hobbes 2009, 88).

In fact, it has been suggested that the inevitability of war is the simplest, most general, thought which unmistakably identifies one as a political realist (Herz 1951). In my view, it is not only war, but conflict more generally, whose inevitability marks one as a political realist. All realists in fact do seem to agree that conflict is an inescapable and un-disposable feature of our human world. They may give different reasons for why this is actually the case: based in human nature, in the form of our political institutions, or in the structure of social interaction, as Kenneth Waltz famously distinguished (Waltz 2001). They may also derive different implications from the inevitability of conflict, but they all agree that conflict is always going to be present whatever we believe and whatever we desire.

It is a fact, that politics always confronts us with the real danger of conflict because political actors are real individuals with different interests, beliefs and powers and not purely abstract ideas or propositions that can be reconciled through rational dialogue according to some neutral standard of truth or to a moral ideal of reciprocity. It has been said on this regard that ‘those writing from diverse positions – republican, liberal, and communitarian – converge in their assumption that success lies in the elimination from a regime of dissonance, resistance, conflict, or struggle’ (Honig 1993, 51). Although their intents differ, idealists seem to agree that the elimination of conflict is possible. Realists, on the other hand, firmly believe that history has made abundantly clear that this is not the case. Politics for them consists in managing

recurrent conflicts. The goal is its continuous containment, not elimination. Bealey, for instance, reminds us that ‘Political science is much concerned with conflict: indeed, without conflict it would not exist because politics would not be necessary’ (Bealey 1999, 79). To eliminate conflict, would be to eliminate politics. This is why, according to realism, Kantian political philosophy aims to eliminate politics by means of morality. As Galston puts it: ‘high liberalism represents a desire to evade, displace, or escape from politics’ (Galston 2010, 386). This does not mean that realism becomes a sterile celebration of conflict, completely detached - and even opposed to - its declared intention to emphasize the role of facts and reality in informing political guidance, as it has been suggested (Baderin 2014). On the contrary, it is from the very idea of conflict that we derive practical guidance. As Honig, an advocate of agonism, writes: ‘to affirm the perpetuity of the contest is not to celebrate a world without points of stabilisation; it is to affirm the reality of perpetual contest, even within an ordered setting, and to identify the affirmative dimension of contestation’ (Honig 1993, 15). Realism thus does not degenerate into ‘complacent realism’ (Estlund 2014, 115), with respect to conflict. Quite the contrary, realists often recommend that we put in place procedures that contain unavoidable conflicts and avoids their escalation to violence. In this respect, realism is not merely a critical stance but to some degree a transformative one, since it is linked to the need for order. The inevitability of conflict does not imply that we actively pursue it, only that we accept their constant present and prepare for its potential for violence.

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