

stealth torture has been adopted universally by the majority of regimes using torture. Even so, Rejali's work is a careful and extensively documented study that will shed light on torture methods for researchers on the topic.

Bibliography

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Realism and Political Theory

A review of *Philosophy and Real Politics* by Raymond Geuss. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008, pp. 126, ISBN13:978-0-691-13788-9, £13.95.

By Michael Bacon

Raymond Geuss' purpose in this short and sometimes polemical book is to inject a dose of realism into contemporary political theory. Much recent discussion in political theory adopts what Geuss calls an 'ethics-first' approach in which an 'ideal theory' of how humans ought to act is identified, politics being seen derivatively as a matter of applied ethics. The ethics-first approach is said to be that of most utilitarians and deliberative democrats, but most significantly of 'neo-Kantian' philosophers such as John Rawls and Robert Nozick. The problem with this approach lies in what Geuss thinks the manifestly false assumptions that ethics is separable from other areas of human life and that it is capable of being captured in a single theory.

In the first part of the book, Geuss proposes a realist approach to political life. It is realist in accepting that politics is not about principles but about concrete power-relations. He finds this approach neatly captured in Lenin's question "Who? Whom?": who has power, for what ends do they use it, and who suffers in consequence? (p. 23). Expanding on this formulation, Geuss proposes that political philosophy should concern itself with five tasks: (1) understanding, specifically of how political agents behave and how decisions are taken; (2) evaluation, enabling citizens to critically evaluate political institutions and policies in terms such as their usefulness and efficiency; (3) orientation, helping citizens understand their role within their society; (4) conceptual innovation, introducing new terms in order not simply to reflect but to alter the way in which the world is understood; and (5)

ideology, helping to uncover the ways in which the exercise of power mean that “certain particular interests can plausibly present themselves as universal ones” (p. 53).

Geuss does not dismiss ideas of justice and right, but thinks that they must be understood in terms of their application in particular contexts. Noting that modern political theory began with Hobbes, his task in the second part of the book is to explain why he thinks it unfortunate that contemporary theorists sideline Hobbesian realism in favour of Kant. Kantianism is evidenced in the work of Nozick and, overwhelmingly, Rawls. Geuss is highly critical of Rawls. Some of this concerns the detail of Rawls’ argument in *A Theory of Justice*. For example, by depriving individuals of knowledge of their particular beliefs and interests through the device of the ‘veil of ignorance’, Rawls is charged with removing the resources by which they might meaningfully choose principles of justice.

The argument here is not wholly persuasive. It is not the case that Rawls deprives agents of all grounds for choice. Rather, agents know that they have certain interests and that, whatever these turn out to be, they will need certain primary social goods in order to pursue them. But this point is less important than Geuss’ central objection, which is that agents in the ‘original position’ are asked to choose principles of justice in ignorance of the power relations that operate within their society. This is said to follow from Rawls’ Kantian belief that humans share a moral sense (or set of ‘intuitions’) which is not historically contingent. For Geuss, this disastrously ignores the circumstances in which intuitions are in fact formed: “To think that an appropriate point of departure for understanding the political world is *our* intuitions of what is “just”, *without* reflecting on where those intuitions come from, how they are maintained, and what interests they might serve, seems to exclude from the beginning the very possibility that these intuitions might themselves be ideological” (p. 90).

It might be objected that a critic such as Geuss may properly offer criticisms only if he or she goes on to present something constructive by way of alternative. Geuss has no time for this objection. “I reject this line of argument completely: to accept it is to allow the existing social formation to dictate the terms on which it can be criticised, and to allow it to impose a theoretically unwarranted burden of positive proof on any potential critic” (p. 96). This is in keeping with his contextualist view that different proposals will be relevant in different times and places. At the same time, as I have indicated Geuss does offer some ideas about how political theorists ought to proceed.

It is however not always clear that in staking out his realist position, Geuss can completely avoid some of the issues that he identifies as problematic for ideal theories such as those of Rawls. Consider for instance the fifth task he proposes for political theory, the unearthing of ideology. He writes: “a political philosophy could

play a progressive role in combating ideological illusion, such as when the philosophy in question demonstrates the dependence of certain beliefs or desires on the continued existence of particular configurations of power that would otherwise remain hidden” (p. 53). It would be helpful to know more about how illusion is to be determined. Is it the case that only beliefs which do not stem from some particular configuration of power are non-illusionary? In which case, how are we to tell when we have escaped such configurations? Similarly, by what standard is ‘progressive’ to be measured?

That is to say, giving up on ideal theory does not I think free Geuss entirely from the need to offer something positive, for example in support of his assertion that neo-Kantianism is ‘reactionary’ and that his own realist position is progressive. As it stands, Geuss is at his most interesting and persuasive when offering criticisms of ideal theorist such as Rawls. These seem to me as powerful and instructive as any that have yet been made. Political theorists would do well to heed them.

A More Complicated Humanitarianism

A Review of *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power and Ethics* edited by Michael Barnett and Thomas Weiss. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp 303 ISBN: 978-0-8014-7301-2, £ 16.95

By Stacey Lynn Fink

Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power and Ethics, edited by Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss, is an insightful and much needed study of humanitarianism in an age where its importance is ever-rising. The book takes a critical look into the ontological anxiety of humanitarian organizations, the identity crisis that ensues, and the contemporary pressures and exogenous factors contributing to humanitarianism’s complex issues. What separates this work from previous research on humanitarianism is its comprehensive structure. As Peter J. Hoffman and Thomas G. Weiss point out in the final chapter, it is not only a book for the curious scholar, but it is also for the humanitarian worker, to be used as a guide for bridging the gap between knowledge and practice. The authors stress that to repair the damage thus far requires “not simply a humanitarianism that is strong, but one that is smart” (p. 285): emphasizing the need for humanitarianism to learn from social science research and apply it in the field.