

Whose Realism? Which Reality?

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“The folly of the times is the wish to use consensus to cure the diseases of consensus. What we must do instead is repoliticize conflicts so that they can be addressed... and give politics back its former visibility in the handling of problems and resources.”¹

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Realists claim they see the world for what it really is. Their visions are not clouded by illusions of utopia or glued to the rocky terrain of mere appearance. The world they encounter is usually messy but one which carries its own logic that helps them surmount obstacles to understanding and action. Even if the claims of realists are true, the question arises, “Which realism do we select?” It turns out there is a variety of realisms, some of which stand in clear opposition to each other.

Some versions of political realism have been associated with efforts to rationalize the use of power. On this reading, we encounter a theory which purports to examine the "real world" and know not only what counts but also what is possible. Whether intentionally or not, this approach, which I call conventional realism, has been accused of exonerating existing institutions and practices and denying much space for change. Moreover, it gives little or no room for critique; what we have, after all, is what is possible and proposals to change matters significantly are taken to be utopian. In this way, conventional realism is seen as freezing arrangements of power, particularly those arrangements that maintain or expand the position of current powerholders regardless of the costs to others.

The conventional realists against whom these charges are frequently leveled are heavily

¹ Jacques Ranciere, *On the Shore of Politics* translated by Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1996), 106.

indebted to empirically based works of such scholars as Arthur Bentley, Joseph Schumpeter, David Truman, and the early Robert Dahl. I have recently written about their projects and so will not spend much time with empiricism here except to notice its pervasiveness and its limiting view of politics.² It is limiting on several grounds. For one, conventional realists divide the world into analytical segments in order to examine its various parts piece by piece. In their thirst for precision, they fragment the political in order to assiduously examine segments of politics and government. When they have completed their self-assigned tasks, they are unable to reassemble the many pieces and have them tell the story of how the parts are related to one another and to the whole.

As they limit their view to the fragment of politics under examination, conventional realists seldom ask what the consequences of power arrangements might be on other citizens or groups. Many conventional realists also narrow their gaze when they make the process of problem solving substitute for understanding how problems are defined or who is excluded in the agenda-setting process. Working in the world of appearance, conventional realists seldom encounter power and even less frequently detect the cruelty that resides in the world. Finally, they have a penchant for eschewing normative concerns, finding that such matters undermine their empirical quest.

Two other forms of conventional realism that have come to characterize contemporary thinking are market realism and managerial realism. The former focuses on what is said to be the law-like regularities of the market that guide economic growth.³ With managerial realism,

² "Pluralism: Modern and Postmodern," Midwest Political Science Association, April, 2001.

³ See my "The New Fatalism and Democratic Politics," American Political Science Association, Sept. 2000 as well as Ronald J. Terchek, "Political Metaphors: Markets or Oligopolies," *Associations* 3, 2 (September 1999).

we encounter claims about the necessity of increased production and efficiency to provide a good life for everyone (at least eventually). Each presents a vision of reality that justifies its own momentum and, in repelling anything that stands in its way, has the effect of contracting democracy when it becomes an obstacle to what these conventional realists consider progress.

It turns out that realism comes in many other forms. We can talk of the realism in international relations associated with Hans Morgenthau or look at Joel Rosenthal's "righteous realists." In a much different vein, Roy Bhaskar speaks of scientific realism. Richard Boyd wants to emphasize "moral realism" in philosophy, and Robert Grafstein develops a theory of "institutional realism." For his part, Jeffrey Isaac turns to "critical realism" which he contrasts with empiricism.⁴ In their theorizing, many of these realists find that the world does not speak for itself (and hence argue that empiricism is inadequate by itself to do the job) and try to find some organizing principles that reliably describe the part of the world which interests them.

The problem confronting all realists has to do with locating organizing principles that explain the phenomena under consideration. In this way, they need to do more than describe the world around them; they need to say something about why it behaves the way it does. Although indebted to empirical analysis, they also attempt to move beyond it. For Clifford Hooker, "[R]ealists hold that the surface merely dazzles and should not beguile anyone into mistaking it for reality." However, as they dig below the world of appearance, they leave the terrain that we

⁴ Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations* (New York: Knopf, 1955); Joel Rosenthal, *Righteous Realists* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991); Roy Bhaskar, *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation* (London: Verso, 1986); Richard Boyd, "How to Be a Moral Realist" in *Essays on Moral Realism* edited by Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (Cornell University Press, 1988), 181-228; Robert Grafstein, *Institutional Realism: Social and Political Constraints on Rational Actors* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); and Jeffrey Isaac, "After Empiricism: The Realist Alternative" in Terrance Ball (ed.), *Idioms of Inquiry* (Albany: State University of New York: 1987), 187-210 and "Realism and Reality: Some Realistic Reconsiderations," *Journal for the Study of Social Behavior*, 20 (1990), 1-31.

can see and measure and reach for theories to explain reality that go beyond description. For empirical critics of realism, there are dangers that lurk in such theorizing. Again Hooker, "Empiricists, contrariwise, hold that the depths are ghostly, having no independent rationale for their veneration beyond the surface through which they indirectly appear."⁵ For the political realists discussed here, what lies beneath the surface are power and the interests of agents which often conflict with one another. The realists to whom I turn want to do more than study power; they also want to invest politics with goals.

The themes of power, purpose, and critique emerge in Jeffrey Isaac's helpful discussion of critical realism which he describes as "a philosophical perspective developed in opposition to various forms of empiricism and idealism that have prevailed in recent... social theory.... Contrary to empiricism, for critical realism the social world is inherently hermeneutic and historical, concept-constituted and transformational. Contrary to idealism, for critical realism, these ontological characteristics of society are perfectly consistent with the scientific analysis of causal determinants."⁶ Isaac points to Roy Bhaskar, William Outhwaite, and Peter Manicas as leading critical realists. They share the view with the post-positivist epistemologies of Thomas Kuhn, Imre Lakatos, and Richard Rorty that "knowledge is an irremediably social and historical product" (3). Rejecting the Enlightenment view that a reality is out there to be discovered by neutral, independent observers, critical realists deny that the problem of knowledge can finally be solved (4-5). One of the central features of Isaac's critical realism is that it is "grounded in

⁵ Clifford Hooker, "Surface Dazzle, Ghostly Depths: An Exposition and Critical Evaluation of Van Fraassen's Vindication of Empiricism Against Realism" in P. Churchland and C. Hooker (eds), *Images of Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 153.

⁶ "Realism and Reality: Some Realistic Reconsiderations," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*, 20 (1990), 2, 1-31.

an immanent critique of contemporary social theory" (11). With other critical realists, he disparages "the various kinds of positivism and empiricism that prevail in the social scientific discourse" because they inhibit "the development of critical theories and [reject] in principle the possibility of a critical theory with practical intent" (14).⁷ It is this emphasis on "practical intent" that is so important to realists in Isaacs' mold. They approach politics armed not only with principled standards which are meant to serve both as goals and the basis of critique but also with a deep appreciation of the hazards and pitfalls that litter the terrain of power.⁸

But which standards to accept? J. D. G. Evans provides his answer with "cultural realism" which recognizes "the variability which naturally characterizes human affairs" but refuses "to accept the relativist idea that convention can ultimately determine what should be done." Building on Aristotle's arguments for a telos and about the variability of human affairs, Evans believes he can have "both culture and values," that is, both plurality and standards of judgments. With these in hand, he argues that we can ask how a society should be ordered, and "these matters can be ordered better or worse," that is, we can judge the uses of power.⁹

Anthony Giddens has something much different in mind with his "utopian realism." Along with Isaacs, he wants an idealized politics to be practical and argues that "avenues for

⁷ Roy Bhaskar holds that "positivism at once naturalizes and normalizes things and reflects in an endless hall of mirrors the self-image of Bourgeois Man." *A Realist Theory of Science* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1975), 307-308, cited by Isaacs, "Realism and Reality," 16.

⁸ The idea of challenge and critique appears in Brian Richardson's discussion of realism in American drama. For him, "Realism can expose falsehood but cannot reveal the truth. This, I believe, is why realism has provoked such heated and contradictory theoretical debate, why successive authors can legitimately feel they are being more realistic than their immediate predecessors in the mode, and why the methods of realistic depiction undergo continuous transformation" ("Introduction: The Struggle for the Real" in *Realism and the American Dramatic Tradition* edited by William Demasters [Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1996], 3).

⁹ J. D. G. Evans, "Cultural Realism: the ancient philosophical background," in David Archard (editor), *Philosophy and Pluralism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 57-58.

desired social change will have little practical impact if they are not connected to institutionally immanent possibilities.” With this in mind, he seeks to blend utopian ideals with a realistic appreciation of power. Unaccompanied by realism, utopian thinking can be politically irrelevant or dangerous. It can provide psychological satisfactions that come from pursuing principled standards, but it can also produce great calamities if attention is not given to configurations of power as well as to the strengths and weaknesses that reside within any mode of utopian thinking. To be enamored only with what is attractive in utopian thinking but ignoring its vulnerabilities and dangers, is, for Giddens, an invitation to disappointment and possibly disaster. With this in mind, he expects utopian realists to be “alert of the immanent institutional transformations which modernity constantly opens out to the future; it must be political... in the sense of recognizing that moral commitments and ‘good faith’ can themselves be potentially dangerous in a world of high-consequence risks.”¹⁰ Giddens does not want to uncouple purpose from power. If power proceeds without goals, it is morally empty but more than that, it is likely to be cruel, unmindful of the harms it inflicts as it employs power to suit its own purposes.

In warning against a utopianism that is inattentive to both the limits and dangers that often reside in power, Giddens speaks to an issue that has long preoccupied many political realists. Some, such as Reinhold Niebuhr, focus on how pride and passivity undermine the noblest of ideals. He is particularly concerned about a pride that inflates our contingencies into the absolute good, that privileges our reason above the outlooks of all others, and that assumes our power is (or should become) sufficient to achieve our goals. However, a passive indifference to power invites others to use it without attention to the things we think important and defeat the

¹⁰ Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 153-55.

very things we hold dear. Niebuhr finds that not only power but also the human condition is full of paradox. He argues that

the same radical freedom that makes man creative also makes him potentially destructive and dangerous.... [T]he dignity of man and the misery of man therefore have the same root. This insight is the basis of all political realism...., [and] it justifies the institutions of democracy more surely than any sentimentality about man, whether liberal or radical.¹¹

Democracy refuses to privilege anyone's pride but requires each citizen or group to present its case publically before fellow citizens and other groups. Even though democratic institutions and practices cannot repeal lethargy, they remove an enforced institutional passivity. Individuals cannot be forced to be politically involved, but they are not forced to be politically quiet. The political realism I have been sketching not only makes power a central concern of politics but also holds that any good realistic theory carries the materials to critique both existing political arrangements as well as alternatives to them.

¹¹ *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (New York: Scribners, 1953), 101.

Realism and Innocence

Innocence and political realism seem to be antithetical, and in important ways they are. Political realism is stepped in power while the former is, or wants to be, free of it. Innocence comes before the fall when there is no knowledge of good and evil. It is a time devoid of corruption, before interests and attachments become part of the way people understand themselves. Innocent persons are free from evil intent, something we see in Rousseau's noble savage who is also prepolitical. With Rousseau's savage, as well as Billy Budd, another exemplar of innocence, we encounter persons who do not see the consequences of their action. They may be as good as Billy Budd is, but they can also be as violent and destructive to others as well as to themselves.

Innocence seems to be separated from the world, and realism embedded in it. For this reason, political realism has typically challenged innocence (or a perfectionist idealism), but here I argue that some deployments of realism have a component of innocence as well. It is important to emphasize that the reality that realists construct is always partial, and these constructions carry blind spots about the parts of the world not included in their understanding of reality. They are innocent about any harms and disabilities they may cause as they work within their own reality. Those realisms that operate in the political world but deny plurality and ignore power are particularly vulnerable to this kind of innocence.

We encounter an expression of prepolitical innocence stalking politics today with market and managerial realisms. Like many other expressions of conventional realism, theirs' hides power, employing what they take to be the neutrality of management, markets, or bargaining. Their ideals are embedded in such goals as economic efficiency and development, a growing

economy, or pursuing an equilibrium which are said to carry the promise of a better life for everyone. Unleashing what they take to be the natural, emancipatory power of free markets or the science of management, these new expressions of innocence do not seem conscious of the harms they cause or, when they do detect them, hold they are necessary but temporary costs that are required by the march of progress and efficiency.

This is an innocence which works to displace much traditional state power which it sees as restrictive and suffocating. It is alarmed not only by the one party states but also by the welfare state in modern democracies. Concerned as it is with what it sees as inefficiencies or interferences in markets, it seeks to constrain domestic politics that thwart its goals, whether in the postindustrial world or elsewhere. Given the limited bargaining power of organized labor and agriculture today, market and managerial realists often encounter a state that is weak or ready to accommodate to their agenda. Reflecting their innocence, market and managerial realisms speak in a prepolitical language. They pretend that what they do is above and apart from politics; their subject matter is said to be problem solving or market growth. As such, they frequently deny to themselves and others that they employ power and disregard complaints about their conduct and goals as beside the point.¹²

Market and managerial innocence is prepolitical in another way; it denies that there is a plurality of moral positions that must be taken into account. From Aristotle through much of the present, good democratic practice not only acknowledges a diversity of moral positions but also argues that means must be found to give expression to them. In the prepolitical world of markets

¹² In some ways, this expression of innocence takes us back to Aristotle's conception of the household where necessity is met before the polis is formed.

and managerial innocence, political speech is seen as distracting people from what is really important, that is, issues of economic growth and management. At the same time that it is innocent, both market and managerial realisms are linked to positivism, something which they see as not only escaping normative restraints but also power and all of its messy, intrusive character. They study and react to their immediate domain of interest. As each scans the universe, it sees only what its polished, sophisticated lenses detect, and the rest is a black hole. It turns out that this hole is the space where democracy and plurality live and where they are often jeopardized.

Democratic Realism

In offering democratic realism as a way of thinking about politics, I borrow heavily from a literature in political theory that emphasizes that what is political about politics is power.¹³ In this literature, power is not a matter of management or strategy, although some writers are concerned with these issues; power is joined to purpose and is linked to the character of the state and society with its myriad practices. It is a literature that rejects conventional solutions as necessarily appropriate, finding that some contemporary arrangements undermine the purposes that they ascribe to democracy. For democratic realists, good political theory has a strong dose of critique built into it.

This is also a literature that acknowledges both diversity and plurality. Sometimes the range is wide, sometimes narrow, but always there is the supposition that diverse men and women have different goals and aspirations that need to be heard. In other words, the good

¹³ Some of the contributors to this literature include Giddens, Isaac, Niebuhr and Norberto Bobbio whom I discuss below as well as John Dunn.

polity does not attempt to make everyone the same or make everyone desire the same things. With this in mind, democratic realists seek to disperse power among citizens. From this perspective, democratic realism attempts to combat both conventional realism which accepts the world that it sees as well as utopian views of society.

I take democratic realism to rest on a pair of views regarding the human condition and a pair of views regarding social relations. Democratic realism holds that we are embedded in our contingent interests and come to know ourselves through them. However, we also define ourselves beyond our contingent interests and reach for ideals to give ourselves a moral meaning. The second pair centers on social relations. Our desperate, diverse contingencies continually carry real prospects for conflict. Even so, our moral capacities enable us to seek just and equitable relations with one another.

The first of each pair is, in the aggregate, taken to be unavoidable; the second element lies in the realm of possibility. To consider only the first or only the second elements in each pair is, from this perspective, incomplete and is, respectively, either positivist or utopian. Although the attributes of power and conflict remain constant for democratic realists, the situations, standards, institutions and practices in which they occur are subject to modification, but how much modification is another story. What they are and what they may become represent the limits and opportunities challenging human aspirations and prudence. Democratic realists see democratic politics as a problematic exercise and hold that however much we share with others and cooperate with them, there will be occasions when we disagree, and good democratic arrangements encourage that disagreements be expressed and negotiated nonviolently.

A pessimistic view of the humanity would make democracy impossible and a

perfectionist view would make it unnecessary, but for democratic realists, appreciating the incommensurabilities embedded in the human condition, democratic politics should be expected to be unsettled and contentious.¹⁴ For them, there is no fixed human nature that can apply to everyone, and efforts to impose such an understanding reflects not only pride but also undermines the purposes and nature of liberty.

Claiming that popular government addresses the paradoxical nature of social relations and their potential for conflict, democratic realists do not expect citizens to escape their contingencies and rush toward a common good. Rather, democratic realists find that the members of any democratic regime are unable to loose all of their interests but should be expected to accommodate and compromise, to live with partial successes and partial failures, to mute some of their own desires, and to correct their mistakes. It also means that some citizens are not always losers on issues important to them; in other words, they are not always obeying and never have a hand in governing.

The contribution of democratic realism to political theory and contemporary politics comes from its invitation to enlarge the subject matter of public discourse and to move away from our current preoccupations with utopianism, on the one hand, and positivism, management and markets, on the other. Among the questions democratic realists ask concern the location and uses of power, how our search for efficiencies often unwittingly undermines the very things we value, how institutional arrangements and practices assess heavy costs to some citizens, and how contemporary institutions and practices reward, neglect, and penalize different forms of conduct.

¹⁴ On such a reading, the absence of any serious conflict signals a deficiency not a victory for democratic politics. This is not the same as saying that a society of pervasive and intense conflict is the hallmark of the good republic but rather to emphasize that a quiescent regime has either reached a perfection unachieved historically or that it has somehow muted the deep differences that democratic realists expect to exist in any society.

To pursue some of the features of democratic realism, I turn to the work of the Italian neorealist, Norberto Bobbio and his expression of democratic realism.

Bobbio as a Democratic Realist

Although Bobbio lived under fascism and, as a socialist, has publically debated the Italian Communist Party for several decades, it is a mistake to assume that his democratic theorizing is meant principally to serve as a contrast between democracy and autocracy. When he scans the contemporary terrain, he finds much that is troubling to the democratic prospect, such as unaccountable elites, neo-liberalism, technical specialists, secrecy, and bureaucracy. For all their problems and broken promises, Bobbio considers the democracies of the West to be democracies. One of the principle tasks that he sets for himself when he talks about contemporary challenges to democracy is to alert and warn.

It is a curious celebration of liberal democracy that Bobbio offers us: democracy is full of paradoxes, failures, ironies, disappointments, and broken promises, but he finds it is the best arrangement for governing. For him, liberalism and democracy uneasily but necessarily collaborate in a common undertaking that reflects their respective historical origins and are continually revised in response to new social forms and expectations. For Bobbio, the tensions between democracy and liberalism reflect these changes and, he argues, it is essential to keep these tensions alive.

In the spirit of Weber (whom he often cites), Bobbio takes into account the institutional and cultural features of society. Institutionally, contemporary society is described as pluralist, bureaucratic, corporate, urban, group-configured, complex, industrial/post-industrial, and

interdependent. Minute divisions of labor and technical specializations weave their ways through the many discrete institutions of modern society. Culturally, this is a time that can be described as secular, egalitarian, materialistic, and individualistic. In making these and related properties the defining characteristics of modern life, Bobbio holds that they provide some of the materials which both extend and constrain modern liberal democracies, and a good democratic practice will take account of them. We see this in his discussion of pluralism which has become an integral part of our lives today. On his account, modern democracy “has no alternative but to be a pluralist democracy.” Both democracy and pluralism, he argues, are concerned with abuses of power. As Bobbio sees matters, pluralism operates in the economy (with the free market), politics (with its many sites of power) and ideology (with alternative views of how to organize government and society).¹⁵

Bobbio also finds that the modern state has become a market-place where political elites compete for votes. Rather than try to invent a political order where the many rule and elites have been banished, Bobbio is prepared to live with elites but challenges their proclivity to separate themselves from the demos and act secretly. As he understands matters, the real criterion regarding power today must be “between ascending and descending power” and if elites are freed from the former expression of power, then they have become autonomous and unaccountable to the demos (*Future*, 32). To forestall this possibility, Bobbio seeks struggles “against the abuse of power on two parallel fronts; against power from above in the name of power from below and against the concentration of power in the name of the distribution of

¹⁵*The Future of Democracy* translated by Roger Griffin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 59-60.

power" (*Future*, 60).

Truth, skepticism, and grand narratives

Bobbio rejects the position that there are ultimate truths awaiting to be discovered by human beings who are directed by science, philosophy, detached reason, or religion.¹⁶ Grand narratives, whether offered by the left or right, offer to explain our history and chart our future, leaving little if any room for human volition and inviting us to accept the world around us fatalistically. Such narratives exonerate the sufferings they spawn and make everything subordinate to reaching their destination.¹⁷ Standing in opposition to grand narratives, Bobbio observes a world that is unsettled, ready to change, open to improvements of a limited sort, but always vulnerable to the designs of the powerful. Accordingly, he wants democrats to make their way through the political world by appreciating its possibilities and pitfalls through reason and experience.¹⁸ The ambiguity of human history cancels, for Bobbio at least, the moral certainty that drives grand narratives with their intolerance of outlooks that depart from their comprehensive view of the good.¹⁹ Seeing both morality and history as constructed, Bobbio

¹⁶ The issue here is not that Bobbio holds that religion has nothing to say but that its truths cannot be the basis of politics, something he wants to be secular in the modern world.

¹⁷ See Bobbio *Ideological Profile of Twentieth-century Italy* translated by Lydia Cochrance (Princeton: University Press, 1995) and *Which Socialism? Marxism, Socialism, and Democracy* translated by Roger Griffin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

¹⁸ “For a lay person, there is only one history, and it is the one we live, with our unresolved doubts and unanswered questions. For this history, the only guide is our anything but infallible reason that draws data from experience upon which to reflect.... For lay persons, history does not unfold according to a predetermined course, already traced from the beginning.... It is a history for which it is useless to try to find an ultimate meaning because this does not exist” (Norberto Bobbio, *In Praise of Meekness: Essays on Ethics and Politics* translated by Teresa Chataway (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000] 11).

¹⁹ For Bobbio’s position on ambiguity, see his *The Age of Rights* translated by Allan Cameron (London: Polity Press, 1996), 36.

wants people to be tolerant and moderate, virtues that he believes are not only essential to democracy but also flow from it. One reason is that he sees democracy as a politics that expects citizens to be ready to negotiate with one another and be prepared to compromise, characteristics that the politics of extremism considers weak and unprincipled.²⁰

Bobbio is particularly concerned with the proclivity of grand narratives to identify one great evil that must be conquered, once and for all, be it class exploitation, race, or the like. For him, such a position is pathological in its blindness to the many different expressions of evil that invade any society.²¹ This pathological orientation leads to an extremism which in turns leads to a rejection of democracy.²² This happens because no slack is given in the battle with the greatest evil, and other goods, including democracy, can be discounted in such a struggle.²³

Grand narratives continually expect people to suspend their everyday reason in favor of some larger reason or law or science. Even though Bobbio does not specify what he has in mind with the term reason, he frequently links it to experience and sees it resisting delusion, despair, romanticism, and utopianism. One of the things that such reason produces is an appreciation of its limits, but such a conclusion is not an invitation to leap into the ethereal realms of a faith

²⁰ “The extremists on opposing sides... have similar reasons for opposing the moderates: the heroic, warrior virtues of courage and boldness, as against the virtues of prudence, tolerance, calculating reason, and patient mediation, which extremists consider distastefully commercial. However, the latter virtues... constitute the essence of democracy, given its reliance on compromise. It is hardly surprising that extremists of both the left and the right despise democracy for the virtues it fosters and requires for survival” (Norberto Bobbio, *Left & Right: The Significance of a Political Distinction* translated by Allan Cameron [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996], 25).

²¹ “In a lay vision of life there is no absolute Evil. Instead, there are many forms of evil” (*Meekness*, 13).

²² Left-wing and right-wing extremists “share a rejection of democracy” and have in common “a strong anti-Enlightenment element” (*Left & Right*, 21).

²³ Here, as well as in his discussion of pluralism, Bobbio shows a close affinity with Isaiah Berlin’s value pluralism.

guided by a grand narrative. For him, “Humans cannot avoid reasoning, but reason alone is not enough. Followers of reason alone know their limits, but they are precluded from going beyond them.....[T]o know what they must do, and above all to do it effectively, they do not need any other teachings than those of reason and experience” (*Meekness*, 155).²⁴

Such reason, for Bobbio, should produce a skepticism about conventional answers and traditional solutions. His commitment to skepticism emerges in his quarrel with the existentialism of Heidegger and Jaspers, which he finds full of despair.²⁵ Not that Bobbio is a thorough-going optimist; indeed, several commentators have detected a strand of pessimism in his works. Nevertheless, hope is important if one is to act politically. Such action, however, must question everyday practices and conventions and, for this, a skeptical attitude is necessary, but, it turns out, it is a skepticism of a certain kind. Bobbio finds existentialism full of scepticism, but its brand is said to paralyze the actor and freeze action.²⁶ For Bobbio, a healthy skepticism “is the ripe fruit of an exuberant culture.” The questioning of Bobbio’s skeptic leads to action; the skeptic is “the man of the world *par excellence*.” In contrast, the person filled with despair “is incapable of action in the world” (*Decadentism*, 11). The problem with despair is that it leaves persons alone. Such a person is “isolated, shut up in his finiteness—his own

²⁴ “Contrary to the small lamp of reason, faith illuminates, but often its dazzling light can cause blindness” (*Meekness*, 173).

²⁵ In the spring of 1944, a few months after he was released from prison for his anti-Fascist activities, Bobbio wrote *Decadentism*, a short book on existentialism. The work provides an early and important statement on his outlook on politics even though it is one of the least overtly political works of Bobbio. In it, he works with themes that reappear in his writings again and again. One has to do with the ambiguity of life, history, and ideas. Another concerns his argument that many of the ideas that begin nobly turn on themselves and become perverse. See Norberto Bobbio, *The Philosophy of Decadentism: A Study in Existentialism* translated by David Moore (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1948).

²⁶ As Bobbio sees matters, both Heidegger and Jaspers “fail to grasp the meaning of society regarded as a union of beings involved in a joint struggle—as *struggle* and *cooperation*” (*Decadentism* 50).

prisoner” (*Decadentism*, 46-7). Without a concrete world in which to participate, such a person has no room for politics. While hardly expecting a good democracy to automatically invigorate citizens civically as we find in some communitarian thinking, Bobbio wants people to be politically alert and skeptical as they carry the hope that they can matter.

Bobbio’s hope is not propelled by a vision of a good society where all conflicts are ultimately dissolved and justice is secured for everyone. Whether it aims at improvements or addresses great injustices,²⁷ Bobbio’s hope is an integral part of his idea of a good democratic practice. On his account, “Hope is not enough to win, but if one does not have a little hope, then the game is lost before you even begin” (*The Age of Rights*, 71). Hope energizes; it transforms the passive into the active citizen and cancels fate in favor of commitment. Rather than reaching for the certainties of grand narratives, Bobbio wants us to take charge of giving meaning to ourselves and the world.

Realism

Bobbio knows the capacity of the state to harm; to visit the most intense cruelties. Nevertheless, it provides people with essential security. In his work on Thomas Hobbes, Bobbio reports that “humankind in its historical development, has built, by instituting the state, the most complicated, perhaps the most delicate, and surely the most useful mechanism. Only this mechanism allows human beings to survive in a natural environment which is not always friendly.”²⁸ What is unfriendly in an unmediated nature is the tendency of human beings to be

²⁷ Human rights, and before that the extension of the franchise to include all adults and the growth of the welfare state, are principled goals Bobbio thinks would not have come to pass if people were saddled with despair.

²⁸ Norberto Bobbio, *Thomas Hobbes and the Natural Law Tradition* translated by Daniela Gobetti

concerned about one's individual self-interests which often collide with the interests of others. This is the place where hope has only one focus and that is to survive. To avoid the conflict and insecurity this brings, Bobbio turns to the state, particularly one which finds ways in which the plurality of interests can nonviolently be brought together to settle their differences. For this reason, security, important as it is to Bobbio, is not a sufficient criteria to judge the state, particularly if it mimics Hobbes' *Leviathan*. The possibilities for the abuse of power are too prevalent, and Bobbio moves to democracy where power is dispersed.

Relating power to the autonomy of individuals, Bobbio argues that without power, individuals are at the mercy of those with power and their life is not their own, it is someone else's.²⁹ For him, power is "intimately connected with freedom. Everyone has as much power as he or she has freedom. There is no power without freedom" (*Which Socialism?* 91). When Bobbio asks why we need to worry about security, he answers that we need to defend ourselves "from Power, from every form of Power. The essential political relationship is the relationship between power and liberty" (*The Age of Rights*, 69). One reason democracy is so compelling to him is that it has the capacity to provide this security nonviolently among equals by dispersing power. Finding that those with concentrated power are vulnerable to the temptation to use it for their own purposes, even at the expense of others, Bobbio argues that democracy "provides the best remedy for the abuse of power" (*Which Socialism?* 95).

Seeing politics as a series of conflicts which are never finally settled, Bobbio holds that

(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 38.

²⁹ One reason Bobbio is attracted to liberalism is its historic reliance on a social contract that rests on the essential equality of each person. Bobbio believes that people would not consent to the contract if they thought they were transferring their freedom to others so others could be free.

power never disappears.³⁰ For him, no fixed equilibrium, harmony or stasis awaits us and enables us to dispense with power or avoid all conflict, and Bobbio finds that the transparency in which conflict occurs in democracies to be one of its central promises. He is particularly attracted to its capacity to expose abuses of power and its ability to make political claims contestable. For him, "Public scrutiny is itself a form of control, is a device which allows distinctions to be made between what is permissible and what is not" (*Future*, 34). Bobbio thinks it is realistic to expect that the holders of power will often conceal much of their power, for if their power is not recognized for what it is, there is no accountability. Accordingly, he wants citizens to insist on transparency in government and to exercise oversight.

Part of Bobbio's democratic realism stems from his insistence that democracy works within social and cultural contexts, and as contexts change, it is necessary for democracy to respond to those changes. We see this in *Which Socialism?* where Bobbio identifies four enemies of modern democracy: "the large scale of modern social life; the increasing bureaucratization of the state apparatus; the technicality of the decisions it is necessary to make; and the trend of civil society towards becoming a mass society" (*Which Socialism?* 99). Taken together, they represent serious challenges to older conceptions of democracy and the task for democratic realists is both to work within these confinements without succumbing to their gravitational force and, in recognizing their debilitating effects, to resist their most dangerous expressions and find new opportunities for democratic expression.

³⁰ Bobbio sees political life proceeding "through a series of conflicts which are never definitely resolved, and whose temporary resolution comes about through provisional agreements, truces, and those more durable treaties called constitutions" (*Future*, 121).

Bobbio's democratic minimalism

The term democracy has many definitions, and Bobbio fears that some of them do a disservice to democracy because, sooner or later, often very soon, they undermine democracy. This is particularly true of those definitions that speak in the name of the people or the interests of a particular class and claim a mandate to do what they do, even if that means moving away from democratic institutions and commitments. Democracy is, for Bobbio, first and foremost, about democracy, that is the rule of the many. It is not about economic matters or social justice, even though democracies concern themselves about such matters. On his account, such attentiveness to particular policies should never become a reason to discard the minimal rules of the game on which democracy depends. Bobbio offers his “minimal definition of democracy... to mean first and foremost a set of procedural rules for arriving at collective decisions in a way which accommodates and facilitates the fullest possible participation of interested parties” (*Future*, 19).³¹ For him, arrangements are democratic “only if those who exercise power at all levels are in the last resort accountable to the original holders of ultimate power, the individual members of the public” (*Future*, 21).

With his minimal definition, Bobbio hopes to avoid the twin but distinct dangers that come from investing too much in democracy and finding that it cannot deliver or expecting too little from it and accepting what is presented as democracy as adequate.³² In regards to the former, he argues that “the task of theoretical criticism [is] to identify and denounce solutions

³¹ For Bobbio, democracy “signifies first and foremost a set of procedural rules, among which majority rule is the main, but not the only, one” (*Future*, 63). Also see *Which Socialism?* 65-66.

³² “A good democrat should neither have delusions about achieving the best nor be resigned to accepting the worst” (*Future*, 62).

which can only exist on paper, to translate impossible formulas into feasible proposals, to distinguish the solid content in emotive rhetoric” (*Future of Democracy*, 45).³³ The problem from expecting too little from democracy is that it leads to fatalism and apathy, and the ascending power that Bobbio projects into good democratic practice diminishes or even disappears. This is why elites are not troubled when citizens are apathetic. “Quite the reverse: the fewer people vote, the less pressure [elites] are under” (*Future*, 67).

One way to combat apathy is to provide citizens with “real alternatives... so that they can choose between different solutions” (*Which Socialism?* 66). But he does not see that occurring in many contemporary democracies which have attempted to circumvent the conflicts that distinguished the left and right earlier. Certainly, it is necessary to reduce conflicts, and Bobbio relies on a voluntary consensus within democracies to serve as a gatekeeper, but he also thinks it is a mistake to think that a quiet politics is a good democracy.³⁴

As Bobbio understands matters, it is not possible to be on the left and right at the same time (*Left & Right*, 1), but that is what the inclusive middle attempts to achieve in its efforts to create a consensus by reducing political alternatives.³⁵ Expressed as the politics of the third way, it aspires to transcend

the politics of left and right, unlike the centre, which is simply in between the left and the right. In practice, the third way is in the centre; but in theory, it claims not to be a compromise between two extremes, but to supersede them both, and therefore it accepts

³³ This, he tells us, “is the task I have set myself”

³⁴ I take up the importance of noisy democrats in *Republican Paradoxes and Liberal Anxieties* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), chapter 3.

³⁵ Bobbio does not expect a good politics today will resurrect the old left and right; they have been left behind. Nevertheless, the contest between equality and liberty, the welfare state and markets, and myriad other deep disagreements persist today. Moreover, injustice takes on new forms and a healthy democracy will give voice to those who challenge its most recent expressions.

and suppresses them at the same time (in contrast to the ‘included middle’ which rejects and separates.).... The ‘included middle’ is essentially practical politics without a doctrine, whereas the ‘inclusive middle’ is essentially a doctrine in search of a practical politics.

The history of political thought—or perhaps I should say, political fantasy—can produce thousands of examples of such third ways (*Left & Right*, 8).

Third way politics calls on citizens to leave their previous commitments and forge a new consensus, transcending the messy business of the old politics. However, Bobbio sees the third way depriving people of realistic choices and ignoring matters that deeply concern many. It is a politics that becomes blind to the cruelties and inequities that inhabit our world as it works for agreement about a conflict-free polity. As he understands democratic politics, it is about presenting alternative programs for organizing society, and claims by the third way to avoid conflict by transcending contestation deprives democratic citizens of their voices by denying them alternatives.

Democratic ideals

With other democratic realists, Bobbio reaches for normative standards, both liberal-democratic ideals as well as those concerned with social justice. He acknowledges that the standards he seeks do not always cohere, indeed some inevitably conflict with one another. Bobbio does not try to dissolve conflicts, as happens with the politics of the third way, or have one standard trump the rest, as happens with many grand narratives. Rather he sees political ideals in a necessary, fluid tension, such as in the case of individualism which generates such values as human rights, political equality, and market competition that can become incommensurable with one another.

Holding that “Man is a teleological animal, who generally acts with a view to an end

projected into the future,” Bobbio finds that it is natural for individuals to carry not only interests but also normative standards, (*The Age of Rights*, 34). If there were no goals in view, actions would become instrumental or everything would become relative. In either case, neither powerholders nor their observers have a standard to judge, undermining one of the central purposes of democracy, that is, popular accountability. With this in mind, he finds that “Striving towards the good, or at least towards the correction, containment and destruction of evil... arises from the... awareness of the suffering and unhappiness in which humanity lives and the need to escape it” (*The Age of Rights*, 37).

Even so, Bobbio recognizes there may be some occasions when it is necessary to suspend some ideals, such as when two worthy standards conflict. However, when the state departs from moral standards, then it is necessary for the state to “justify the deviation and not the [moral] rule” (*Meekness*, 67). Departures from the rule in contemporary democracies are not apt to be the blatant disregard for the rules of democracy and human rights that marked the conduct of the extreme right and left earlier in the twentieth century. Rather departures today often make small and often unnoticed cuts in the rules and are likely to be administered by specialists, managers, and promoters of markets who have their own agenda and find that some rules, including democratic ones, stand in the way of their goals. Although no single departure seldom has much effect, cumulatively they can shrink democratic space.

What are the ideals that Bobbio thinks that democracy should carry? Central to his list are those that are concerned with democracy itself, and we find some of them in what democracy was once expected to achieve, such as transparency, the attack on oligarchies, the growing democratization of society, and the abolition of invisible power (*Future*, 23-42). It is also a

politics directed against arbitrary state power. Such a democracy, he believes, would promote “the defense of humanity, involving the three great assets: life, liberty, and economic security” (*The Age of Rights*, 68).

According to Bobbio, “Democracy is the political system that allows for the closest encounter between morals and those of politics.” Why? One reason he gives is that it requires social conflicts to be settled nonviolently; secondly, democracy “needs the broadest extension in the relation of mutual trust between citizens, and therefore must banish the strategy of falsehood and deceit as much as possible;” and finally, laws in a democracy rest on “agreements made by different groups,” creating “a highly contractual society.”

Bobbio’s ideals can not become blueprints for the perfect society or strategies for molding the perfect citizen. The certainties of the past can no longer be our comfort; we are fated, if we are to be realistic, to see democracy, as John Dunn proposes, “as an acknowledgment of shared fallibility and shared vulnerability—not democracy as a boast of political capacity or a claim of political privilege.” This, Dunn goes on to argue, is what “modern politics stands so urgently in need.”³⁶

Making ideals a part of democratic realism is particularly pressing today, according to Bobbio. With the fall of the Soviet Union, it would appear that the established democracies can celebrate victory and go on with their affairs without the worries of the past. But Bobbio says no and wants to resist temptations to ignore issues of social justice, particularly in precincts far from home. He insists that the deep problems that drove many to communism still remain in the world, and he asks,

³⁶ John Dunn, *Interpreting Political Responsibility* (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 1990), 215.

Are the democracies that rule the richest countries of the world capable of solving the problems that communism has been unable to solve?... Historical communism has failed, I won't dispute that. But the problems remain, precisely the same problems, which exist now and will in the future on a world scale, that the communist utopia had pointed to and considered solvable.... Do you believe that the end of historical communism... has put an end to the need and thirst for justice?

Democracy has won out over the challenge of historical communism. But with what means and what ideals is it preparing to face those very problems from which the communist challenge was born?³⁷

Success has brought relief to the established democracies but Bobbio believes that this is the time to challenge hierarchy, injustice, and inequality, three issues that he sees interrelated. For him, democracy makes itself vulnerable if it does not address the disabilities that haunt much of the world, particularly that part which is not yet developed but is being buffeted by global markets. To ignore such a challenge combines both a pride and an innocence that is blind to the pain and cruelties of the world, particularly to those it sponsors. Bobbio and other democratic realists, such as Niebuhr, think this is dangerous to those who suffer as well as to the established democracies which inadvertently invite efforts to change matters, including those led by nondemocratic, autocratic movements.

Democracy and liberalism

In addition to the ideals mentioned in the previous section, Bobbio wants to protect liberal and democratic individualism. For a socialist, Bobbio has an unusually strong attachment for individualism and sees it at the core of both liberalism and democracy. Insisting that democracy and liberalism are inexorably linked, he argues the one cannot survive without the other. At the same time, he finds an unavoidable tension between them which he wants to

³⁷ Norberto Bobbio, "Utopia Overturned," *Dissent*, Summer, 1990; translated by Raymond Rosenthal, 341.

keep alive. Accordingly, his view of a good democratic politics is not be about making either liberalism or democracy subordinate to the other.

Although he finds that ancient democracy and modern liberalism are inconsistent, Bobbio sees no such problem with modern democracy and liberalism; indeed he insists that they are not only compatible with one another but are essential to each other. The reason this does not hold for ancient democracy is because the

democrats of antiquity were ignorant of both the doctrine of natural rights and the idea that the state had a duty to confine its activities to the minimum necessary for the community's survival.... Modern democracy, however, is not only not incompatible with liberalism, but can in many respects, if only to a degree, be regarded as its natural extension.³⁸

The importance of liberalism, as he sees matters, is its commitment to rights and this in turn contributes to modern individualism. Prizing individualism, he admits that it can become distorted and he has particular problems with economic liberalism. However, its core principles are essential to both democracy and the good society. Two kinds of liberalism that particularly interest Bobbio are economic and humanistic liberalism.³⁹ The former focuses on the market and combats the interventionist state; the latter concerns such matters as “the assertion of human rights to combat any new form of despotism” (*Future*, 106). Bobbio's liberal individualism is not about possessiveness or insularity, but rather speaks to the essential worth and dignity of each person; something which both the state and society should respect.⁴⁰

³⁸ Norberto Bobbio, *Liberalism and Democracy* translated by Martin Ryle and Kate Soper (London: Virso, 1990), 31.

³⁹ Bobbio also contrasts market liberalism with limited state liberalism which, he holds, are in continual tension with one another (*Future*, 104).

⁴⁰ “While civil liberties are a necessary condition for the exercise of political liberty, this—in other words, the popular control of political power—is a necessary condition, first, for the achievement, and then, for the

He tells us that “Without individualism, there can be no liberalism” (*Liberalism and Democracy*, 9). It turns out that both “liberal individualism and democratic individualism come into being through the struggle against various modes of organicism,” something which attempts to blur distinctions and create a uniform whole (*Liberalism and Democracy*, 43). Bobbio’s democracy relies heavily on an individualist outlook; indeed he calls the principle of one person, one vote “the philosophical basis for democracy” (*The Age of Rights*, 42). Later, he argues “If you eliminate the individualistic concept of society, you will no longer be able to justify democracy as a good form of government” (*The Age of Rights*, 105).

Nevertheless, he sees several tensions between liberalism and modern democracy, and only one of the reasons has to do with the conflict between economic markets and democracy. Democracy stands for equality, but economic liberalism is premised on the idea that inequalities are natural and necessary. As Bobbio sees matters, economic liberty and democratic equality are antithetical because “neither can be fully realized except at the expense of the other: a liberal laissez-faire society is inevitably inegalitarian, and an egalitarian society is inevitably illiberal” (*Liberalism and Democracy*, 32).⁴¹

Another aspect of the tension is the tendency of liberalism to detach individuals from

conservation of civil liberties” (“Libertà” *Enciclopedia del Novecento*, III [Rome: Istituto dell’Enciclopedia Italiana, 1979], 998 as cited by Corina Yturbe, “On Norberto Bobbio’s Theory of Democracy,” *Political Theory* 25, 3 [June, 1977], 382).

⁴¹ Bobbio argues that the neo-liberal revival is not only attacking the contemporary welfare state but democracy itself.

Not only is the Welfare State jeopardized, in other words, the great historical compromise between the working-class movement and advanced capitalism, but democracy itself is at stake, i.e. the other great historical compromise which preceded it between the traditional privileges of the propertied classes and the world of organized labour, which gave birth directly or indirectly to modern democracy (*Future*, 115).

For him, this is an “attack [on] democracy pure and simple. There is great danger here. Not only is the Welfare State jeopardized, in other words the great compromise between the working-class movement and advanced capitalism, but democracy itself is at stake” (*Future*, 115).

each other and for democracy to unite them. He finds liberalism separating individuals and sponsoring the insularity and disconnectedness that communitarian critics often lodge against liberalism.⁴² Rather than reach for a tightly bounded community or some kind of organic view of society to repair the problem, Bobbio looks to democracy to unite what liberalism has divided.⁴³ Liberalism is seen as leaving individuals without a sense of how to confront common problems while democracy enables citizens to do just that. Nevertheless, Bobbio finds something very important in the individualism that liberalism sponsors.

Liberalism highlights the individual's capacity for self-creation... Democracy holds in highest regard the individual's capacity to overcome the isolation by devising various procedures allowing the institution of nontyrannical common power.... Two different potential individuals are in question: the individual as microcosm or totally complete in itself, and the individual as a particle (or atom) which is indivisible, but which may be combined and recombined with other similar particles in various ways, giving rise to an artificial (and thus always fissionable) unity (*Liberalism and Democracy*, 43).

Some dangers to democracy

Bobbio speaks of the broken promises of democracy. His list includes the promises that the people shall rule but, in practice, they are fractured into several groups; representatives should represent the nation and its good but in practice, they are interest-attentive to their constituencies; oligarchic power has not been removed but rather reappears in new forms; democracy promises that social life will be democratized but democracy remains confined to political venues; "an invisible state" exists "alongside the visible state;" the educative effects of

⁴² See, for example, Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

⁴³ "Liberalism amputates the individual from the organic body, makes him live—at least for much of his life—outside the maternal womb, plunges him into the unknown and perilous world of the struggle for survival. Democracy joins him together once more with others like himself, so that society can be built up again from their union, no longer as an organic whole but as an association of free individuals" (*Liberalism and Democracy*, 43).

democracy remain unrealized; citizens have had many of their powers usurped by technicians; the bureaucracy also limits popular control but is created by democracies; and finally the democratic state is unable to satisfy demand adequately and efficiently in a timely manner (*Future*, 23-42). Nevertheless, Bobbio insists that these "broken promises or unforeseen obstacles... are not sufficient to 'transform' a democratic regime into an autocratic one" (*Future*, 40). One reason he believes this is so is because basic rights, competing parties and public discourse continue to protect the minimal conditions for democracy.

Here I take up a few of the broken promises that Bobbio identifies. The promise of pursuing a common good has been shattered by the particular interests that so disturb Rousseau and which have exploded in modern democratic practice. What we have today, according to Bobbio, are negotiations that are continually "carried out between... quasi-sovereign power elites [who] constitute the real web of power relations in contemporary society, in which government, 'the sovereign'.... is just one power elite among others and not necessarily the strongest one at that" (*Future*, 127).⁴⁴ For Bobbio, the central issue is not that a common good has evaporated, something he thinks illusive anyway, but that elected democratic elites often step aside in favor of nonelected, nondemocratic elites.⁴⁵

Another broken promise concerns open government which Bobbio insists is essential to

⁴⁴ "Democratic doctrine imagined a state without the intermediary bodies which characterize the corporatist society of medieval cities... It envisaged a political society without any subsidiary associations of particular interests intervening between the sovereign people made out of so many individuals and its representatives (*Future*, 28).

⁴⁵ Bobbio is particularly worried about nonpolitical elites determining public policy in today's democracies. He sees "neoliberal" critics of the welfare state proposing to dissolve the tension between the democratic state and capitalism "by cutting the politician's nails while leaving all the business executive's talons razor sharp" (*Future*, 115).

the democratic process.⁴⁶ However, he finds that the promise of transparency has become a cliché. As he sees matters, we have ignored "invisible power," and a contributing factor is that empirically driven analysis (and one can add the mass media) can only see power as "manifest, obvious, [and] visible." His concern with secrecy leads him to augment his minimal definition of democracy with the insistence that democracy means "the rule of public power in public" (*Future*, 79). For him, one great danger of secret government or invisible power comes when public officials become mortgaged to economic power to finance their campaigns.⁴⁷ As dangerous as secrecy is to democracies, Bobbio believes it can, with vigilance, be controlled and is not yet systemically embedded in the institutions and practices of modern liberal democracies (*Liberalism*, 95).⁴⁸

A third broken promise has to do with the displacement of citizens in making public law, partly because of the tendency of political elites to bargain outside of the purview of public scrutiny. But another reason singled out by Bobbio has to do with specialists who use their technical language and knowledge to construct opaque walls around their centers of power (*Future*, 92).⁴⁹ An additional obstacle to popular control emerges with the growth of the bureaucracy with its top to bottom path of control, something which Bobbio sees as antithetical

⁴⁶ "The old question of who guards the guards, can now be formulated as 'who controls the controllers?' If no adequate answer can be found to this question, democracy in the sense of visible government is lost" (*Future*, 34).

⁴⁷ Bobbio is also concerned with "cryptogovernment" which bring "paramilitary forces" and "secrete services" together to control dissent.

⁴⁸ Bobbio finds that autocratic power "not only conceals itself so as not to disclose where it is, but also tends to conceal its real intentions at the moment when its decisions have to be made public" (*Future*, 79).

⁴⁹ "Today, political debate is increasingly carried out by experts: economists, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, biologists; specialists in all the various disciplines into which the vast area of the social sciences is divided (*Ideological Profile*, 173).

to democracy. Much of the growth of technical specialists was unplanned and occurred when the economy shifted from the family as its focus to the market economy and then to a “protected, regulated and planned” economy which requires “technical expertise.”⁵⁰ But, he goes on to argue, “Technocracy and democracy are antithetical” and the reason is that more and more decisions are removed from of the orbit of citizen competency and oversight (*Future*, 37).⁵¹ Even with all of these broken promises and obstacles, Bobbio finds democracy has not been transformed to autocracy.⁵²

Bobbio’s realism works with many of the assumptions that we find in Isaac’s critical realism and Giddens’ utopian realism. He sees a world that is constructed, that claims for rights, for example, are just that, claims. For rights to be respected and expanded requires political action and not just better arguments. Moreover, Bobbio makes critique one of the principle tasks of politics, and he does this not only by showing the problems, deficiencies, and dangers that he detects in conventional political practice but also by discussing these same concerns regarding his own preferred political positions. Bobbio does not want to confuse political aspirations, including his own, with the minimal requirements of democracy. As a socialist, he seeks to mobilize democratic support for egalitarian policies, but as a democrat he refuses to make

⁵⁰ The word shift is important here because Bobbio wants to reject the idea that there is a progressive, evolutionary process at work and that every change is ultimately for the best or that liberalism and democracy march together on a common trajectory. Sometimes they do, and sometimes the shift in one serves to strain their relationship.

⁵¹ “Today, the threats to life, liberty and security come from the increasing power of those who control scientific discovery and the applications that stem from it” (*The Age of Rights*, 69).

⁵² “The minimal content of the democratic state has not been impaired: guarantees of the basic liberties, the existence of competing parties, periodic elections with universal suffrage, decisions which are collective or the result of compromises.... or made on the basis of the majority principle, or in any event as the outcome of open debate between the different factions or allies of a government coalition” (*Future*, 42).

socialism a requirement, prerequisite, or precondition for democracy which stands on other legs. To make socialism (or markets) one of them only weakens democracy.

With many conventional realists, he makes power the basic ingredient of politics, but unlike many of them, he associates power with normative standards, particularly those that are linked to democracy and liberty. He wants to know the purposes of power because it is not a neutral phenomena but a force that can enable or disable. Power is not something that is lodged only in the state but rather is dispersed throughout society, held in varying degrees by interested participants.

Conclusions

Democratic realists want us to use democratic principles to ground our politics as well as be conscious of the unavailability and ambiguity of power. They stand in contrast to idealists who come armed with a moral optimism that right will triumph. Moral action in politics means more than picking from a moral menu. If Machiavelli teaches us anything it is that politics is played out in a morally tempestuous world without neat rows of hedges that mark off a safe place for morality. Recognizing the fragility of morality in politics, democratic realists, nevertheless, insist on the importance of holding principled standards as well as reflecting on the their consequences as they are applied in specific situations.

Carrying principled standards does not mean ignoring the empirical world for democratic realists, but it does mean not allowing empiricism on its own to identify what is important, what is to be done, and how matters are to be judged. An empiricism that takes power as a background condition, often a neutral one, leaves out an essential part of the core of politics for

democratic realists who depart from empirical realists in three ways. For one, the former are more apt to critique the empirical world rather than describe and accept it; second, democratic realists are apt to examine both the configurations of power and its consequences; and finally, democratic realists are apt to ask about the purposes of power and how they enhance or diminish democracy.

For democratic realists, politics is a continuing process, subject to change in a world in motion, and they want to understand both the limits and opportunities of democratic politics. Normative standards play a role in their theorizing because they enable us to critique existing practices and policies, and having done so, to work within our capacities to affect change. Machiavelli, for example, warns about the drift to corruption and the decline of republican institutions and offers ways to subvert them in order to extend the life of the republic; Niebuhr deplores the condition of marginalized and urges social justice to confront it; and Bobbio attempts to protect liberal democracy from encroachments from nondemocratic power.

Finding no definitive answers to the riddles of politics, democratic realism offers a critique about the shifting locations and concentrations of power in a world that refuses to stand still. It provides perspectives about power in an imperfect world that resists but can respond to a politics of purpose. Self-consciously normative, democratic realists accept freedom and equality as axiomatic in the modern world, and, following from this, they seek to protect and extend democracy.