



ESSAY JANUARY 4, 2024

## The Promise of Realism

SAMUEL MACE

Only a healthy realism can make productive change possible.

I AM OFTEN ASKED AS A POLITICAL THEORIST WHAT KIND OF world I would want to live in. For me, this is always the wrong question. It naturally sets up the hope that anything is possible. In imagination, the fields can be full of perfectly mowed grass, all injustices can be righted, and war can be vanquished. But this is not realistic nor even obtainable.

Indeed, by pursuing unobtainable goals, we risk the very things we have now. By promising the world, utopianism and utopian political orders eradicate the very real gains and systems we have in place. We have seen this in Mao's China, Lenin's Russia, Hitler's Germany, and the Islamic State's short-lived Caliphate. These regimes, on the surface, may have

little in common, but all possessed a will to reject the actual for the imaginable. All also descended into the lowest pits of morality and murder.

Writers have likewise fallen into this seductive trap. Jean-Paul Satre, Michel Foucault, and Malcolm Caldwell all expressed support for despotic regimes in search of a wider truth. Their vain hope led many leading intellectuals to abandon the principles they held in search of achieving a more perfect society. As Albert Camus shrewdly observed, the death of principles comes not from not having them but from our willingness to abandon them to defeat or seek revenge on those who frustrate our attempt to live out our vision of a more perfect world.

If we are to remain principled then, our principles must be acted on consistently. But for them to be practiced consistently, we must also expect them to be to some extent realistic. It is unfair, even bizarre, to try to tie someone to their utopian values. In order to be enacted, our values must not just interact with the real world but take into account the constraints the world puts in front of us. Some would speak here of moderation and half measures but I venture to call it political realism.

Calling for a change to the world is the easiest thing a thinker can do. Almost all children ask why the world is not perfectly fair and equal. To merely proclaim the need for a fairer and more just world is thinking like a child in an innocent but simultaneously naïve and useless manner. Values, in order to be practiced fully, have to be considered in relation to the structural and societal barriers to achieving utopia.

This requires us all to limit our dreams to what the world will allow to be realised. For instance, believing that the capitalist system needs to be significantly reformed to get a better deal for workers is one thing, but demanding the downfall of capitalism itself takes thinkers away from not just realisable goals but the worthy notions of justice and equality which underpin such an idea in the first place. If the world's limits are not taken into account, ideas may never be enacted, or as so often happens when thinkers are given the chance to be enacted, people may become

bastardised and stained in blood in an attempt to achieve heaven on earth.

The question must be asked: How many people can really stand up and maintain political sainthood? We must therefore embrace a form of realism that intermingles value and action instead of pining for perfection which will at best lead to disappointment and worst to the devaluation of principles themselves. Everything may seem possible in our heads but the reality is that incremental changes are not just more likely but also less risky. Like the hare and the tortoise, it is oftentimes better to move slowly to achieve the final goal.

The opposite of utopianism is not pragmatism, as some may imagine, but realism. Pragmatism asks us to compromise on what we believe whereas realism makes us engage with the real world via our principles themselves. Realism, a school of belief oftentimes associated with International Relations, is a broader philosophical exercise into the art of the possible. Unlike pragmatism, which relies upon tempering philosophical wants and desires, realism asserts the need to engage with politics as it is practiced. Realism therefore can and even should shape what we want by virtue of what is possible to achieve. Bringing theoretical claims into the real world enables us to conceive of the world realistically instead of longing for an unobtainable goal.

Some scholars, such as John Rawls, have also called this process “feasibility.” By requiring us to engage with the world around us, realism enables our values to become much more substantial than if they merely existed in an untouchable sphere of our minds. After all, what is the point of values if they cannot be acted out or seen in action? They become nought but words. Perhaps for some, existing purely in the realm of the impractical makes for an easier life, since confronting the realities of our world is difficult.

It is difficult for the thinker to confront such realities. By “prob[ing] the limits of practicable political possibility” (Rawls, 2008 [emphasis added]) we must inherently acknowledge that our desires and deepest wants likely cannot be fulfilled. The world is not a sandbox we can simply

mould to our wishes. Instead, it acts like wet concrete where some change is possible at specific moments which are quickly sealed up.

Inevitably this involves intellectual and even spiritual disappointment for those who think about the world in such ways. We may convince ourselves that god makes all things possible, or possessing the power of god grants us the freedom to reshape the world as we may. Yet, no one ever has the whole world in their hands. Grappling with that disappointment and cold hard reality that the world is not this way is not an easy task but it is a necessary one.

This may make those who believe in the power of change depressed at their own naivety. The world can be a cruel and harsh place, especially for those who dare to dream the impossible. The dangerous illusion that one convinces oneself of makes you feel foolish once the folly has been exposed for what it is. This can produce feelings of shame, anger, bitterness, or simply an unwillingness to recognise where you have gone wrong.

Yet today we need realism more than ever. We do not have the luxury of hypothesising aimlessly about the world. Gone are the days of mere political managerialism which once defined the Western world in the post-Cold War era. These days there is a genuine clash of values that will shape our societies over the next twenty years, and the real political choices we face may be uncomfortable. There should be no hiding from that fact.

But still, we are tempted to hide. One example of this is Susan Glasser of the *New Yorker*. Glasser on Rachmann's review, a UK-based podcast focusing on foreign politics, stated that the problem with America was not that maybe one-fourth of the populace believed in conspiracy theories such as Pizzagate, but that there was such a leader who would take advantage of this fact. Glasser was seemingly ignorant to the sad reality that where such a large proportion of the electorate holds particular views, inevitably a political entrepreneur will come on the scene and take advantage. She had it precisely the wrong way around.

Trump is not inherently the problem; the problem is that he caters to a substantial audience, which means he cannot be ignored.

The answer to the Trump question is not to, as Hillary Clinton did, call his supporters a “basket of deplorable,” or mock and demean them. Accepting and recognising that Trump’s base feels the way they do should be just as important to the democratic health of America as recognising how minorities feel about their lives and histories. Pretending those voters have merely been duped, rather than expressing their will, is a categorical mistake that only makes a Trump voter double down. Rather than pretending Russia changed the election result or the citizens who support Trump have been manipulated by some malevolent force, why don’t the centre-left accept Trump supporters’ “truth” in the same way they would anyone else?


Pretending voters have merely been duped and Trump isn’t what they want provides a comforting blanket over the truth many find disturbing. Millions of Americans find Trump’s aesthetics and politics attractive in some form over the dull, policy-laden alternatives they have been offered. This is not to say Trump isn’t a shameless charlatan or a demagogue; he is both in my opinion. However, that is not all he represents. He clearly offers something that American politics in its present form otherwise would not. Instinct and passion, whether good or bad, are just as important as coherence and capability in the mind of the voter, and this should be something every honest journalist of politics considers. We cannot kid ourselves anymore about greater ideals on the battleground of democracy.

This combination also raises uncomfortable questions about the uneasy alignment of liberalism and democracy. John Stuart Mill’s fear about tyrannies of the majority has never been fully answered precisely because constitutional protections for minorities ultimately rest upon citizen will. A state can put up safeguards and temporary roadblocks to delay the will being enacted but that is all. The polarisation and division countries face is very real and they threaten the roadblocks states have enacted to protect certain rights once deemed fundamental.



This requires the centre-left and centre-right to think creatively and address honestly the problems that the radical right and left bring to the table. The last thing such parties should be doing is pitching to the clouds or to a citizenry that does not exist. Harking back to Tony Blair and Bill Clinton may soothe the soul of a particular brand of political aficionado but it is no answer to our current challenges. Instead, such parties, and political thinkers, must engage with conditions on the ground to facilitate the enactment of their ideals.

We have to contend with the fact that resources are dwindling and many citizens feel let down by successive governments. Simply talking in vague abstractions about rising GDP when many people are facing crises in housing, wages, and societal standing is insufficient. In these conditions, decrying some people's privilege when they feel they have no privilege at all is not the first step in creating a fairer society but the beginning of a recipe to facilitate a strong backlash.



Without realism, not only can you not make progress on your values, you can actively harm the cause you want to support.

Parties, politicians, and civil society must recognise each person's struggle. Engaging in politics on the ground rather than relying upon technocratic solutions and actively listening to citizens must be the first step. Dismissing citizens as a "basket of deplorables" is the kind of high-handed rhetoric that has come to define progressive parties. For their own sake, it must end.

Instead, they must win back the base of the working class by speaking to their needs. Parties need to go and speak to these communities and not just for the purposes of PR. They need to understand and recognise their needs which don't appear on a spreadsheet or too often as part of the wider progressive activist community. These citizens need to feel cared for and valued when all too often they are at best neglected and at worst actively dismissed.

Today, we live in a society where too many can buy advantages for their children in the form of tutoring, private education, and special help which is inaccessible to many creating unfairness and disadvantage in the heart of the supposed meritocratic model. More and more jobs are swept away on the tide of globalisation which has left too many stranded on an ever-shrinking empty beach. Pensions are dwindling in their worth as once again poverty in old age becomes a reality for more and more. These are the structural limitations decimating the hopes and ambitions of tens of millions of people which today more often than not go unnoticed and uncared for.

But the need for realism is broader than mere electoral politics. When we see and engage with protest groups such as "Just Stop Oil," we hear their messages and see their roadblocks and feel little but scorn. Indeed, having spoken to activists from Just Stop Oil at my university, they feel that civil disobedience is the only way the government will listen to them. Yet, they were seemingly oblivious—or even worse, uninterested—in the broader

electorate's concerns about their tactics. They didn't seem to understand that tactics, such as "slow marching" through the road, were having precisely the opposite effect they intended. This is perhaps a common critique of progressive politics, that their dislocation from wider societal norms makes them disconnected from the average voter. The fuel that galvanises change is not simply reminiscence from the old days of mass marches but concrete political conditions such as popular opinion which cannot be dismissed or forgotten about when trying to procure significant policy change.

Rather than actually helping the fight against climate change, Just Stop Oil and other activist groups like them are actively hindering it. They are making climate action appear like the demands of a lunatic few who are hell-bent on simply stopping oil production at any cost. Their negativity on the potential far-off future, and their misuse of emotional words such as "genocide," make them at best laughable, while at their worst they seem fanatical or even dangerous. Their lack of realism, and poor appreciation for political conditions on the ground, render their activism a godsend to oil and gas companies.

Without realism, not only can you not make progress on your values, but you can actively harm the cause you want to support. The world will not simply stop producing oil or natural gas, and neither will we simply stop consuming it. But by not focusing on what we can actively do—such as limit waste, plant trees in cities, build more renewable sources of energy, and invest in our transport infrastructure—Just Stop Oil will appear as a utopian alternative to nothing in particular. It is hard to imagine this movement gaining any kind of mass support until they come back down to earth, consider trade-offs, and engage with more communities about what they want and how it is achievable.

This is not a problem limited to Just Stop Oil. We can see this as part and parcel of many activist groups who see their job not as directing change themselves but as pressuring or guilting others into accepting change. Demands are often divorced from reality, not willing to consider incremental changes to get closer to a better world, and many progressive activist groups demand the world forget its place in it. Rather than helping their cause, they actively hinder it.



Realism gives us a window into the possibility of enacting our values. By recognising and engaging with realities on the ground, our values become richer and more meaningful than if they only exist in our minds. This does not mean abandoning what we believe. Rather, we should turn our beliefs into action by recognising the limits of value and the real constraints that affect the way we act on those beliefs in the world. It is far easier for us to mutter to ourselves or pontificate about how awful everything is rather than to roll up our sleeves and engage with the world. But, if we continue to do that, then the world will become a much darker and uglier place, more quickly than we may like to think. It is time to embrace the real and forget the fanciful.

Law & Liberty's focus is on the classical liberal tradition of law and political thought and how it shapes a society of free and responsible persons. This site brings together serious debate, commentary, essays, book reviews, interviews, and educational material in a commitment to the first principles of law in a free society. Law & Liberty considers a range of foundational and contemporary legal issues, legal philosophy, and pedagogy.

---

**LAW & LIBERTY**

---

PART OF THE LIBERTY FUND NETWORK

© 2024 Liberty Fund, Inc. The opinions expressed on Law & Liberty are solely those of the contributors to the site and do not reflect the opinions of Liberty Fund.

**DESIGNED BY BECK & STONE**