

PIOTR KIMLA
Jagiellonian University

REALISM – THE POLITICS OF AUSTERITY

Summary

The article aims to show political realism not in the deformed framework in which his opponents – political romantics – present it, but as a universal typological category. Pietism in relation to reality forces the realists to postulate a sparse, non-military policy focused on cooperation. At the same time, it demands from its representatives that they avoid involvement beyond their own strengths and seek peaceful coexistence with their opponents in political struggles. The considerations also show the reasons why it is unlawful to bind the imperialism of Napoleon, Hitler and Stalin with political realism.

Keywords: Political Realism and Its Characteristics, Christian Ethics vs Realistic Ethics, Napoleon's and Hitler's Imperialism, Realism and Its Misreadings, Alliances Between States, Strength of States, War, Realism as Moderation

The presented considerations focus on the most advanced form of politics. In my opinion, this means Political Realism¹. Realistic politics is the politics of moderation, cau-

¹ At the beginning of our century, John J. Mearsheimer skilfully opposed the illusions that Political Realism became obsolete with the end of the Cold War. "In fact, all of the major states around the globe still care deeply about the balance of power and are destined to compete for power among themselves for the foreseeable future. Consequently, realism will offer the most powerful explanations of international politics over the next century, and this will be true even if the debates among academic and policy elites are dominated by non-realist theories. In short, the real world remains a realist world". J.J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York 2001, p. 361. Naturally, Mearsheimer's position itself, which as we know, he defined as offensive structural realism, is controversial. It is debatable how much the pursuit of hegemony has in common with Political Realism, even if it were to be "only" a regional hegemony. In the pages of this introduction, I try to prove that Realism is inextricably linked to the awareness of one's own limitations, with the awareness that the permanent domination of the international arena is impossible. This awareness makes it necessary to search for paths of coexistence and understanding with partner-opponents in the political game, since permanently eliminating them is not a successful possibility. This situation generally determines the peaceful attitude of Realists. It is not, of course, about the fact that it would be undesirable to have great power or even to achieve a hegemony. From the



tion, and prudence; avoiding conflicts. I am not saying that this is politics without the use of force, because politics without force does not exist. Let us therefore say, this is with the least possible use of force.

When I refer to the concept of Political Realism, I mean its ideal type as understood by Max Weber. I distil a spectrum of values from specific past political behaviours and their underlying sources of beliefs, which exceeds beyond the mental horizon of every individual representative of Realism. I universalise these values – releasing the ballast of place and time. As long as politics remain politics, the values that constitute political realism will remain unchanged. And politics will remain politics as long as human nature does not change in its fundamental conditions. As long as Kowalski continues to put his own existence and behaviour above the existence and life of Nowak. From the point of view of lofty Christian ethics, Kowalski should be ashamed of his selfishness, his blind attachment to mortal life at any cost. However, two thousand years of proclaiming the good news and the commandments of loving one's enemies do not seem to sufficiently impress Kowalski. One may get the impression that he often overlooks statements from the Gospel of Matthew (5:44-48) and Luke (6:27-33):

But I say unto you which hear, Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you, bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you. And unto him that smiteth thee on the one cheek offer also the other; and him that taketh away thy cloak forbid not to take thy coat also. Give to every man that asketh of thee; and of him that taketh away thy goods ask them not again. And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise. For if ye love them which love you, what thank have ye? for sinners also love those that love them. And if ye do good to them which do good to you, what thank have ye? for sinners also do even the same².

It is exceedingly difficult for Kowalski to translate the above guidelines into his life practices. If the Kowalskis in general were able to do this, politics as an art of reconciling conflicting interests would, of course, become superfluous. It would not be fate, but a whim, a form of violence used by the strong to oppress the weak – as the anarchists want. It would not be a discipline that places the highest demands on human intellect and character. It would not be an area burdened with the insurmountable threat of the return to a natural state that always takes the form of *bellum omnium contra omnes*, never *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. It would not be a sphere burdened with determinism, though not with fatalism. It would not be a space of dominance of relativism, which would not, however, lead to Pyrrhonism, because it does not remove the category of objectivism³. It would not be an area where there is a constant shadow of war – a shadow that the realist politician wants to disperse, but which remains undispersed and is generally indispensable.

Of course, only the mental effort that separates Political Realism from the ideas that deform it allows us to see it as the aforementioned advanced politics. Realism is sometimes linked with its opposite, i.e. with the lack of awareness of boundaries, exaggerated ambitions, and the overestimation of one's own strength. In short, it is linked with the excesses

Realist perspective, grand political designs and sweeping political goals are to be avoided, not because they are undesirable, but because they are impractical.

² Luke 6:27-33 (KJV).

³ The immortal (though not very intensively studied today) Montesquieu, showed how relativism – on the grounds of politics – does not rule out objectivity. Cf. Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, Cambridge 1989.

of Imperialism. In antiquity, the Athenians, enraptured with the increase of their power, wanting to extend it to Sicily, would supposedly be considered Realists. The distance between Athens and Catania in Sicily is not at all that enormous – only about 1,500 kilometres. However, it is in a straight line, as the crow flies. Travelling it takes less than two hours by jet plane. But since jet planes and all other similar modes of transport were a very distant future in those time, the only choice available to the Athenians was the sea route. The route from Piraeus to Syracuse, which the Athenians had at their disposal, was almost two thousand kilometres. The point here is not the fact that people could not travel that distance by ship at the time. The point is that, in the hearts of the Athenians, there was a desire to conquer and occupy a place situated two thousand kilometres from their own homeland. Can this be an expression of Realism?

In the 19th century, Napoleon Bonaparte was supposed to be the last person to combine the art of war with brilliant, Realistic political craft. After him, the progressing specialisation of both disciplines made it impossible to concentrate military and political leadership in one hand. Otto von Bismarck and Helmuth Karl Bernhard von Moltke the Elder are sometimes indicated as symbols of the inevitability of this separation. It should be pointed out, however, that the combination of politics and military did not work in Napoleon's case, either. At the beginning of his political career – generally during the period of cooperation with Charles de Talleyrand – the French emperor presented a sense of reality characteristic of Realists. Over time, however, he lost the sense of boundaries and undertook the realisation of phantasmagorical political plans. In the area of military leadership, he did not draw appropriate and rapid conclusions, either. Although his opponents learned from him (the fastest, as we know, were the Prussians who, among others, had Carl von Clausewitz in their ranks), Napoleon simply repeated the solutions that had brought him dazzling successes earlier. He also failed to modernise the army's armaments, despite implementations of new inventions by the other side.

In the 20th century, Realism is often linked with National Socialism, Adolf Hitler, and German Imperialism in general. Is conflict with almost the entire world, the desire to conquer nearly all of Europe and the Soviet Union, based on phantasmagorical ideology supposed to be Realism in politics? As Kurt Dittmar – one of the German generals serving in the German army after 1933, noted: "Hitler taught and believed that reason and knowledge are nothing, and that the unbending will to victory and the relentless pursuit of the goal are everything. Mystical speculation replaced considerations of time and space, and the careful calculation of the strength of one's own forces in relation to the enemy's"⁴. Just as National Socialists and Hitler were not Realists, neither were the International Socialists (Communists) and Stalin. A confirmation of this point is Stalin's plans of pushing outward from Russia with Communism, all the way to the Atlantic – again, on the basis of a misguided ideology that deprived people of private property, among other things. One of the most important books about Marxism – the foundation of the communist ideocracy – written by Andrzej Walicki, is subtitled *The Rise and Fall of the Communist Utopia*⁵.

⁴ Cited after: B.H. Liddell Hart, *The Other Side of the Hill*, London 1951, p. 59.

⁵ Cf. A. Walicki, *Marxism and the Leap to the Kingdom of Freedom. The Rise and Fall of the Communist Utopia*, Stanford 1995.

Realism is also sometimes synonymous with the absolutisation of the criterion of effectiveness, which, when misunderstood, can also contradict caution, austerity, and a sense of boundaries. That is a misunderstanding. Naturally, the criterion of effectiveness is not ignored or disregarded in Political Realism. What counts in the end is the type of mark that a person leaves on reality through their existence and actions. However, effectiveness is far from being set as an absolute in Realism, one to which all human activity should be referred. After all, it is possible to be effective at the price of ruining the moral sense within a political community, at the price of destroying respect for religion, respect for the law, respect for good manners, respect for authorities; including the authority of power. Such effectiveness (usually short-term, as evidenced by the Nazis; the Communists had more misfortune, so to speak, in this regard, since they managed to maintain Communism for much longer. However, this does not mean that the Communist system was not a revolutionary system until the end) is rejected by every sensible person. Realists belong to this group. They understand and teach that any effective reform is introduced evolutionarily, preferably in conservative clothing, under the cover of religion, often presenting a profound reform as a *de facto* return to what has been learned and what should be remembered. Machiavelli, for example, was of the opinion that “truly there never was any extraordinary institutor of laws among a people who did not have recourse to God, because otherwise he would not have been accepted”⁶.

Therefore, Political Realism, as I read it and present it, is characterised, above all, by a lack of belligerence. It is defined by caution in the approach to life and an economical use of the available means. The pietism in relation to reality promoted by the Realists translates, in their thinking, to pietism in relation to what one possesses in a justified way. Realists are constantly accompanied by a concern for not wasting their resources, and not gambling them in the name of potential, but often illusory, great gains. That is why Realism is situated as far as possible from military and political muscle flexing and bluffing about the power possessed. In this sense, there is a lasting affinity between Realist and Conservative attitudes.

Caution and austerity as essential determinants of a realist political attitude and morality result from the awareness of one’s own limitations, awareness of the limits of the agency of man, and the human community. In other words, realistically thinking people are aware of the “Machiavellian Moment” – to use the language of J.G.A. Pocock⁷. They are also representatives of anthropological pessimism. Humans are weak in their eyes – their intellectual power is weak; their physical strength is inadequate. Only through discipline, rules, and hierarchy do some representatives of the human species rise to a higher level of rationality. However, the hopes of a leap towards rationality are illusory for most of the society. Most are, and will remain, in the embrace of passion, emotion, unwise desires, and affects. Realist thinking, therefore, bears clear signs of elitist thinking. Of course, when it comes to developing a disciplined and reflective way of life, no one is disqualified at the start. Moreover, everyone can “convert” to a disciplined and reflective life at any moment. At the end of the day, however, an existence filled with reflection on the self and the world

⁶ N. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*. Trans. Harvey C. Mansfield & Nathan Tarcov, Chicago 1998, p. 35.

⁷ See J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment – Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*, Princeton 1975.

is a life led by the minority. Erudites will look for similarities to the Stoic School in the above approach.

According to Realists, judgements about politics that have value are *a posteriori* judgements. The task of a statesman is therefore to learn from experience. They should thus strive to ensure that their personal life abounds in a variety of experiences. Saint Augustine is attributed to, wrongly, it seems, the authorship of the statement “the world is a book and those who do not travel, read only a page”. This perfectly reflects the aforementioned postulate of the Realists⁸. However, because the experience of one life – even a very rich one – is only a small excerpt of reality, the Realists put a constant emphasis on studying the past. The conclusions drawn from valuable studies of the history of politics, economics, military, and customs do not lead, according to the Realists, to areas other than the command of austerity and caution. They make sure that *nemesis* is the inseparable companion of *hubris*.

If we develop political knowledge on the basis of experience, then its basic vehicles must be intersubjectively verifiable and intersubjectively communicable facts and effects of actions; not mental attitudes called intentions. If intentions, not the consequences of actions, were to provide evaluation criteria in politics, how could we hold those in power accountable? Do many of them intentionally want to harm the state and the community they lead? They certainly happen to cause harm frequently; however, with the purest of intentions.

The ethical foundation of Realism in the form of responsibility for the effects of political actions means that the time perspective in politics cannot be overextended. In this regard, too, there must be reason and moderation. For Realists, what is political must fit within the time frames in which the category of responsibility retains its meaning. It is impossible to seek the responsibility of a politician for what happens, let us say, fifty years from the time when they influenced reality. In this context, the Realists would consider it ludicrous, rather than political, to argue (like the supporters of the irredentist tradition in Poland, who claim that the greatest national uprisings, although they failed, brought about the rebirth of the Polish state after several dozen or even nearly a hundred years – as is in the case of the November Uprising), that they supported and effectively sustained the spirit of Polishness. From the realist point of view, however, it seems puzzling why the spirit of Polishness should disappear if Poles had their own education, administration, and even army, before the November Uprising destroyed all these institutions, which were salutary for Polishness. Is it really the case that if Poles do not conspire, fight, and die, they immediately forget that the ultimate goal is an independent state? In the irredentist, romantic narrative, such a conviction seems to be permanently present, at least implicitly.

The principle of austerity also defines Realism in the field of International Relations. It gives rise to the conclusion that alliances – sensible from a realistic point of view – are those that strengthen the powers of the state, rather than weaken them through difficult-to-meet commitments. Uncertain alliances with weak countries are most often a burden, not

⁸ St. Augustine is sometimes counted, in exaggerated terms, among the Realists, because of his key doctrine of Original Sin and the resulting inability to derive lofty thoughts about humanity. In my opinion, the most realistically-thinking Christian thinker was not St. Augustine, immersed in Platonism and Neoplatonism, but the Aristotelian St. Thomas Aquinas.

an asset. A credible cornerstone of alliances is the dependence of the contracting parties (the fall of one party should cause the other party to fall quickly⁹), and an actual common interest- the realisation of which will increase the security of the participants of the alliance. The interest prevails over ideological divergences and overcomes them¹⁰. “Alliances between States should be regarded entirely from the point of view of might [power] policy”¹¹. Just as an ill-considered alliance can be a problem that does not increase the strength and security of a state, so can territorial expansion. The increase of a country’s territory does not make sense if it requires an exaggerated commitment to maintain the acquisition. An example would be an adjoined territory which is inhabited by a nationally conscious population, who is ready to defend their identity. As Paul Kennedy notes, if a state overextends itself strategically – by say, the conquest of extensive territories or the waging of costly wars – “it runs the risk that the potential benefits from external expansion may be outweighed by the great expense of it all”¹². The Realist is therefore sceptical about political plans that exceed the economic and military resources at their disposal. They know that as a statesman, they set the course, but this course, as Clausewitz reminds us, “is no despotic lawgiver on that account; it must accommodate itself to the nature of the means”¹³. Naturally, a realistically thinking statesman can sometimes opt for war, especially when it seems unavoidable in the future and, in addition, it will be conducted in a worse situation than today. In such cases, a preventive war appears to be a good solution. Generally speaking, however, because prediction in war – unless power faces off against weakness – is almost as difficult as prediction in politics, the voice of the Political Realist is an expression of restraint and conservatism. It is a constant call for avoiding the engagement of the state beyond its capabilities, or building great political plans which, for lack of resources, cannot be anything more than an empty gesture.

Bibliography

- Clausewitz C. von, *On War*, trans. by J.J. Graham, London 1873.
 Kennedy P., *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers. Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, New York 1989.
 Liddell Hart B.H., *The Other Side of the Hill*, London 1951.

⁹ This principle makes carrying out alliance commitments signed by a superpower with a small and weak country highly problematic. The fall of a weak allied state generally does not have a major impact on the existence of the superpower. Aristotle teaches that a true friendship between a very wealthy person and a very poor one is impossible. It seems that it is equally difficult to achieve a credible alliance between a very strong country and a very weak one, unless the existence of the very weak one is somehow indispensable for the strong- for example, because of its geographic location. A comparison made by Stanisław Cat-Mackiewicz, which states that credible alliances are like well-matched marriages, remains rather convincing. It presupposes an equal, or very similar social status, of those to be married.

¹⁰ The most prominent confirmation of this view in the 20th century was the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, which Golo Mann called “the biggest bomb in the long history of European Diplomacy”. G. Mann, *The History of Germany Since 1789*, trans. M. Jackson, London 1984.

¹¹ H. von Seeckt, *The Future of the German Empire*, New York 1930, p. 151.

¹² P. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers. Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, New York 1989, p. XVI.

¹³ C. von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. by J.J. Graham, book I, 23.

- Machiavelli N., *Discourses on Livy*. Trans. Harvey C. Mansfield & Nathan Tarcov, Chicago 1998.
- Mann G., *The History of Germany Since 1789*, trans. M. Jackson, London 1984.
- Mearsheimer J.J., *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York 2001.
- Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, Cambridge 1989.
- Pocock J.G.A., *The Machiavellian Moment – Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*, Princeton 1975.
- Seeckt H. von, *The Future of the German Empire*, New York 1930.
- Walicki A., *Marxism and the Leap to the Kingdom of Freedom. The Rise and Fall of the Communist Utopia*, Stanford 1995.

Piotr Kimla, dr hab. prof. UJ, appointed professor in the History of Polish Political Thought, department of the Institute of Political Science and International Relations, Jagiellonian University, former lecturer at the Charles University in Prague and the University of Padova. Stipendist of the Polish Science Foundation (twice). Author of numerous publications in political and strategical thought history. Most recently published work: *Political Realism – Theory and Practice* (Kraków 2018).