

Friday, April 22, 2011 | Luce Hall | Room 202

Means and Ends

Rethinking Political Realism



Conference sponsored by the Edward J. and Dorothy Kempf Fund, The MacMillan Center, and South Asian Studies Council.

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Description
Program/Schedule
Abstracts

For questions or comments, please contact tatiana.neumann@yale.edu



Means and Ends: Rethinking Political Realism

Conference Description

Dominant models of contemporary political philosophy are animated largely by the question of “ends.” They attempt to define and justify institutional arrangements, rules, and practices according to how best they coincide with or embody an underlying set of norms. Often, the project of normative legitimation/justification is understood to require in the first instance an abstracting away from questions of praxis, power, and history – i.e. from questions of “means,” of practical constraints and possibilities – in the project of reaching an agreement on the principles of justice. As a result, normative theory tends to construe the problem of means narrowly, as a question of how to “apply” principles and norms to a specific set of institutional or policy options. Questions of feasibility, adverse effects, or unintended consequences intrude into normative theory only in extreme cases when recognizably “unjust” means are employed and the coercive imposition of principles of justice are contemplated, e.g. in relation to war and revolution.

This conference aims to move the problem of “means” to the center of political theory. The problem of means may be the central problem of politics, from basic questions of how to get people to accept or enact political decisions, to the myriad ways that any particular political decision or policy proposal encounters and engenders resistance in the contested field of political action. In this view, politics is about much more than value-pluralism or disagreements about what the good life entails but also concerns how even agreed upon ideals entail different modes of implementation and inevitably face opposition, contestation, and attempts at subversion. The conference is thus premised on a series of doubts about the “idealist” orientation of much contemporary political theorizing, both in terms of its characterization of the scope and nature of politics and the forms of knowledge, reasoning, and judgment taken to be most appropriate to understand and intervene in the political world. In the history of political thought as well as in a broader survey of contemporary theory, an unease with the idealism, moralism, or theoreticism of political philosophy has been debated in different ways, from more general questions about the potential conflict between theory/practice, philosophy/politics, morality/politics to specific explorations of political judgment, practical reason, and the problem of unintended consequences. This conference aims to consider these alternative approaches to the problem of politics and delineate the theoretical and practical challenges the political poses as distinct from ethical, moral, and philosophical questions.

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8.30 – 9.00 Registration

9.00 – 10.45 Panel I

Chair: Karuna Mantena, Yale University

DAVID BROMWICH, YALE UNIVERSITY

"The Good Intentions of Empires"

SUDIPTA KAVIRAJ, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

"Successes That Looked like Failures: Re-appraising Nehru's Political Thought"

RICHARD BOURKE, QUEEN MARY, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

"Burke's Difficulty with India"

11.00 – 12.30 Panel II

Chair: Seyla Benhabib, Yale University

PRATAP BHANU MEHTA, CENTER FOR POLICY RESEARCH

"Realism, Moralism and the Structure of the World"

ADAM TOOZE & STEFAN EICH, YALE UNIVERSITY

"Politics in the Crisis of Historicism: Weber, Meinecke and Troeltsch in the Wake of World War I"

KIRSTIE MCCLURE, UCLA

"Politique Judgement"

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1.30 – 3.00 Panel III

Chair: Ian Shapiro, Yale University

MELISSA LANE, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

"Against Negligibility: The Relevance of Individual Action to Social Change"

RICHARD TUCK, HARVARD UNIVERSITY

"What Are Means?"

KARUNA MANTENA, YALE UNIVERSITY

"As the Means so the End: Gandhi on the Problem of Political Action"

3.15 – 4.45 Panel IV

Chair: Bryan Garsten, Yale University

JEFFREY C. ISAAC, INDIANA UNIVERSITY

"What Albert Camus Learned About Political Violence"

VASANTI SRINIVASAN, HYDERABAD UNIVERSITY

"Myths as a Source of Practical Wisdom"

MARC STEARS, UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

"England's Lost Realists: Means and Ends in British Radical Political Thought, 1931-1951"

5.00 – 5.30 Concluding Remarks

JOHN DUNN, UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

To register please visit: www.yale.edu/polisci/conferences/index.html



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Abstracts

Richard Bourke, Queen Mary, University of London

“Burke’s Difficulty with India”

In 1790, Burke characterized the business of politics as involving a “conflict with difficulty.” The idea of difficulty involved here refers to the resistance of the historical process to deliberate design. By comparison, Burke argued, moral enthusiasm seeks “to evade and slip aside from *difficulty*.” Such enthusiasm stakes its claim to justice on the purity of its intentions without reference to the means of implementation. It substitutes righteousness in the place of practical wisdom. And yet righteousness is precisely the tone that Burke was accused of adopting in response to the activities of the East India Company from the 1780s onwards. It seems, in fact, that Burke sought to indict the policies pursued by Warren Hastings in terms of an abstract scheme of moral judgement, disregarding Hastings’ own plea for the contingency of his decisions. This points to an apparent conflict between Burke’s sense of the irreducibility of “difficulty” and his commitment to the over-ruling authority of abstract norms in his writings on India. This conflict reflects rival interpretations of Burke’s politics as based on either “utilitarian” or “natural law” foundations. This paper will argue against the cogency of this antithesis by reinvestigating the relationship between morals and politics in Burke’s writings.

David Bromwich, Yale University

“The Good Intentions of Empires”

Modern empires have often seen themselves as generous partners in an enterprise of common humanity. This self-image, when present, is overriding: the imputed intentions of the empire are looked on as constitutive of its ends, and are supposed to qualify any criticism of the means employed. Favorable results confirm the ameliorative character of the empire; destructive effects are understood to be accidental, unpredictable. The self-image of empire is thus endlessly renewable, short of a conspicuous defeat of its projects, since the presumption of benevolence has no check. Gladstone and Obama. Burke on America and India a partial counter-example.

Jeffrey C. Isaac, Indiana University

“What Albert Camus Learned About Political Violence

Albert Camus was one of the most important and influential political writers of the twentieth century. A member of what Paul Wilkinson has called the “resistance generation” who struggled against fascist and communist forms of totalitarianism, he became famous in the 1950’s for his critique of the widespread faith in political violence as a means of political empowerment. Camus’s defense of a “moderate” and self-limiting radicalism that is alive to complex relations

between ends and means is well known. In this paper I will sketch out the process of political learning and self-criticism through which Camus came to this perspective, focusing on his polemical exchanges with Francois Mauriac about the validity of a “purge” (“épuration”) of French political life in the immediate aftermath of the Liberation from Nazi occupation. Camus’s debate with Mauriac, which culminated in his own public acknowledgment that he had been wrong to support a “purge,” has been widely discussed. My purpose is not to present any new information or even to present a novel interpretation of Camus’s basic ethical stance, but rather to treat this episode as a profile in a particular kind of political courage and ethical responsibility that has much to teach us.

Karuna Mantena, Yale University

“As the Means so the End: Gandhi on the Problem of Political Action”

Gandhi’s political thinking was oriented towards a subversion of the priority of ends over means. This was to reject both amoral instrumentalism and expediency in politics, as well as a political idealism in which right ends enable, justify, and/or redeem the use of dubious political means. Gandhi’s reframing is often construed, in broadly Kantian terms, as the conversion of means into ends, with an attending set of strict ethical injunctions around what would count as legitimate means. This common reading, however, tends to reassert the primacy of ends, whereas Gandhi’s formulation worked, I think, in the opposite direction; it was an attempt to subordinate ends to a serious consideration of the question of means. Gandhi’s assertion that “means are after all everything” is an insistence that the means adopted both determine the plausibility of reaching a specified end and definitively shape the character of political ends as such. Thus the question of means was not solely about legitimacy but also one of political efficacy. An obsession with ends threatened violence but also political retrenchment and escalation. In this paper, I will examine Gandhi’s concept of means and, specifically, its connection with the search for forms of effective political action that can both overcome polarization and resist the collapse into instrumentalism.

Pratap Bhanu Mehta, Center for Policy Research

“Realism, Moralism and the Structure of the World”

What exactly is the difference between realists and moralists? Often these differences stem from ultimate ends. But more often, realists and moralists operate with different assumptions about causality in the world. And they operate with different assumptions about how the world is rendered more ethically rational. What are these assumptions? Where do they come from? Are these merely a matter of moral psychology? Or is there a kind of theodicy implicit in these assumptions? This paper will examine these questions in a comparative context, focusing on Indian texts like the Mahabharata, but also on thinkers like Kant and Weber.

Vasanti Srinivasan, Hyderabad University

“Myths as a Source of Practical Wisdom”

This paper explores the potential of myths as a source of practical political wisdom. Historical sources are mostly focused upon in the western context. But in India, politicians and statesmen have also drawn upon myths and rituals in moderating collective anxieties and conflicts unleashed by radical projects of both the left and the right. Focusing on a prominent saint activist Vinoba Bhav , who was acclaimed as the ‘spiritual heir’ of Gandhi, I uncover the potential and problems with appealing to myths. As an activist, Vinoba initiated a series of *padayatras* or walking tours asking for gifts of land, wealth and so on. Appealing to mythic archetypes, Vinoba tried to incite the desire for fame and honour to tame a politics of resentment. He tapped into an existing gift ethic in the process; the benign aspects of the same such as ‘pure disinterested gifts’ have been invoked in politics. But what about the

dangerous and in fact poisonous aspects of gift giving? Do they have any political implications?

Marc Stears, University of Oxford

“England's Lost Realists: Means and Ends in British Radical Political Thought, 1931-1951”

Realists in contemporary political thought have often turned to the work of an earlier generation of American realists, especially those who wrote in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. As yet, however, they have largely neglected to discuss the alternative realism offered by a group of British intellectuals in the same period and the decade before. In this paper, then, I aim to introduce contemporary political theorists to that alternative realism, both by presenting their work in the specific context in which it was produced and by drawing out arguments that might still resonate with us today.