Supervisors:
Prof. Márton Szabó, CSc
Zoltán Gábor Szűcs, PhD

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I. The topic and aims of the dissertation

The topic of the dissertation is the examination of the different types of political action that contemporary realist political theory is concerned with. It analyses those by building ideal-typical constuctions. Additionally, the dissertation aims to describe the most important problems linked to those types of action, and constructively criticize the vocabulary with which realists describe those problems. The dissertation tries to accomplish these goals with a conceptual framework built around the contingency of action.

The chosen topic links the dissertation to problems which occupy a rather secondary place in the present day realist discourse. Although the „founding fathers” of contemporary realism (Bernard Williams and Raymond Geuss) recurrently refer to concepts directly connected to the contingency of action (e.g. the ethic of responsibility, political judgment or political imagination), recent realist debates have revolved rather around the problem of political legitimation and whether the criticisms levelled by realists against „political moralism” are justified.¹ Contrary to these tendencies, the focus of the dissertation is on the above mentioned, somewhat neglected topics, aiming thereby to describe realism not merely as a critique of moralism, but as a political theory on its own right. This latter goal is consonant with more recent tendencies in the realist discourse.² My aim is to uncover realism’s special sensitivity towards the contingency of action, and the richness of considerations flowing from that sensitivity. These general aims translate into three more concrete goals.

The first goal of the dissertation is (partial) redescription: to describe political realism along the lines of the contingency of action. The formal meaning of contingency is that things could be otherwise. Understood as historical contingency (as Anglo-Saxon political theory usually uses the concept), this refers to the fact that our practices are products of particular historical trajectories, which cannot be justified along universal criteria. However, there could be other uses of the concept, more closely connected to action: here, contingency refers on the one hand to action being subject to changing circumstances, to external luck; and at the other hand to the ever present possibility of acting differently, and to the creative, subversive potential of (political) action. Understood this way, the contingency of action links together such recurrent realist topics as value pluralism (and the ever-present possibility of moral loss and moral dilemmas), political judgment (understood as responsiveness to the facts of a particular situation) and political imagination (understood as creating new political alternatives). Three of the dissertation’s theses (numbered below as 1., 2., and 14.) are connected to this aim directly, while those concerning the autonomy of politics (the 4. and 13.) do so in a rather indirect way.

The second goal of the dissertation is an analytical one: to differentiate various types of political action connected to different forms and levels of contingency. This analytical purpose is served by a typology, where these types of action are construed as ideal types. Besides identifying them, their most important accompanying problems, concepts and political


implications are explored. The thesis about the types of political action (3.) and the critical remarks about „claustrophobic realism” (10-12.) are connected to this main goal.

The third goal of the dissertation is to widen the horizon of the contemporary realist discourse by bringing it into dialogue with realist classics (most notably with Thucydides, Aristotle and Max Weber), and Isaiah Berlin, whose work can be seen in many respects as a kind of „proto-realism”. This attempt at widening the realist horizon has both a critical purchase, and in turn also affects our views about the realist „canon”. The theses connected to this goal are those about the meaning of political judgment and its relationship to constancy (theses 7., 8., 9.), the connection between imagination and charisma (11.), and also the ones linking Bernard Williams to Weber’s ethic of responsibility (5.) and contrasting the Williansian vision of moral dilemmas to the concepts of other dirty hands theorists (6.).

Although the dissertation reflects on a political theoretical discourse, and aims to contribute to that discourse with its findings, it also has a wider relevance, because it addresses questions that lie at the heart of democratic politics, questions such as: What kind of leaders should we choose in a liberal democracy? What kind of dangers and trade-offs are present in our choice? What should we minimally expect from a leader in a crisis situation? Can we draw a boundary between praiseworthy steadfastness and blameworthy stubbornness in such situations? What skills are needed to successfully subvert the status quo, and what normative standards should we use in evaluating political action that subverts political stability?

If we accept that these questions are important in a democratic polity, then the findings of the dissertation can have a relevance outside the discourse of contemporary political realism.

II. Approach, methods and the structure of the dissertation

The dissertation aims at being an internal criticism of realism: it does not question basic realist assumptions (e.g. that the realist critique on „moralist” theorists is justified), but rather tries to refine the conceptual vocabulary of realism. This can be called a „second-order” realist investigation, which takes realist theories as its point of departure, and (contrary to „first order realism”) turns to the analysis of political reality only occasionally, where it is needed to refine the mentioned vocabulary by using it in the analysis of specific historical cases.

Consequentially, the method of the dissertation is conceptual analysis, applied to the texts of contemporary and classical realism. When dealing with classical authors, this includes – to borrow from Gadamer – both the tasks of reconstruction and integration, i. e. sketching the contextual and intertextual environment of certain ideas on the one hand, and translating them into the language of contemporary political theory on the other. These twin tasks would then hopefully result in the „fusion of horizons”. It is important to note that the dissertation attributes primary importance to the second task, integration. Consequently, when I use works of intellectual or conceptual history I do this mainly for purposes related to political theory, not history. Where I resort to the analysis of empirical cases – with the above mentioned intent to

„test” and refine the vocabulary of realist theories – I use the method of analytic narrative, broadly conceived as narrating and comparing historical cases along the lines of certain theoretical problems.5

The structure of the dissertation is as follows. The first chapter introduces the concept of contingency of action, and tries to make the research problem accessible to those not familiar with contemporary political realism. It does so by invoking certain topoi traditionally associated with realism, and also present in the works of contemporary realism. I will discuss three of those: that politics is the „art of the possible”; that politics is an autonomous sphere of human action; and that „In the beginning was the deed”. Furthermore, I will resort to examples both from classical antiquity and from contemporary popular culture to explain how realism sees itself along these topoi, how it distances itself from political moralism, and what internal differences can we detect within political realism.

The aim of the second chapter is twofold. First, it serves as a literature review that gives a comprehensive picture about contemporary realist discourse. Second, it also delineates the theoretical framework of the dissertation. I claim that although contemporary Anglo-Saxon realism is distinguished by an interest in the problems connected to the contingency of action, it uses the concept of contingency in a rather narrow sense, as a reference to particular, historically formed circumstances. I argue that while this concept is suitable for analyzing the relationship between existing practices (the political order) and theory, it cannot account for the relationship between political action and the formerly mentioned two components: existing practices and theory. I aim at giving the concept of contingency greater theoretical range by relying on the work of Kari Palonen, which incorporates both the dimensions of necessity (universality) versus chance (particularity), and that of reality versus possibility into the concept. This way, it will be an appropriate conceptual tool to analyse all sides of the conceptual triangle (i.e. the relationship between theory and practices, theory and action, practices and action). Looking at the relationship between existing practices (i.e. the political order) and political action, I distinguish between three types of political action in which contingency plays a different role: the problems of maintaining, protecting and subverting the political order.

The third chapter is about the first of these, maintenance, and it tries to reconstruct a version of it from the writings of Bernard Williams. Theorizing maintenance as a type of political action focuses on the everyday, normal state of affairs in politics, investigating the role of political action in maintaining stability. According to Williams, it does make a great difference what kind of character our politicians have, as character, alongside integrity and projects mitigates the contingency of our politicians’ actions, making those calculable at least in a minimal sense.

The chapter unfolds this Williamsian problem in three steps. Firstly, it reviews how the contingency of action is present in Williams’ ethical writings, and what political theoretical consequences follow from that presentation. As a second step, it tries to establish a link between Williams’ ethical project and Max Weber’s ethic of responsibility (Verantwortungsethik), referred to by Williams at certain points, and discusses the aspects in which the Williamsian

view is a refinement of Weber’s theory. Finally, it situates the Williamsian view within the literature on dirty hands, construing a model of dirty hands from Williams’ essayistic remarks on the topic, and contrasting it to the model of Michael Walzer and a Neo-Machiavellian alternative elaborated by Demetris Tillyris in recent years. While character mitigates the contingency of action, Williams’ emphasis on moral conflict and the possibility of dirty hands underlines that the contingency of action cannot be eradicated from our moral and political life.

The focus of the fourth chapter is on situations where the protective and the maintaining types of action occur together. These are crisis situations, where political leaders with political projects face great pressure to abandon those projects. The question the chapter tries to answer is this: how can we draw a boundary between praiseworthy steadfastness and blameworthy stubbornness in a democracy? Resolving this issue will be done by assessing the relationship between constancy and political judgment in three steps. Firstly, the chapter analyses Thucydides’ History of the Peloponnesian War, arguing that contrasting certain scenes from the book can help us get a first glimpse on the importance of constancy in a democracy, the role of political judgment in a crisis situation, and their problematic relationship to each other. Secondly, I argue that there is no appropriate theoretical framework in contemporary political realism to assess the type of situations the chapter is interested in. However, the Aristotelian scheme of practical deliberation (more concretely, its particularist reading) can give us the theoretical tools to analyse such cases. The third part of the chapter analyses historical cases from this Aristotelian viewpoint, comparing the conduct of Winston Churchill, Tony Blair and François Mitterrand in crisis situations.

The fifth chapter is about the subversive type of political action, reviewing the conceptualization of the problem in contemporary radical realism (in the works of realist „founding father” Raymond Geuss), and contrasting the Geussian view of subversion with that of a realist classic, Max Weber. The claim of the chapter is that such contrasting of the two authors can lead to important insights about theorizing subversion (especially about the importance of political preferences, practical context and the form of the theory), and can demonstrate that there are places between defending the status quo and propagating radical social reform, a Manichean dualism often invoked by contemporary radical realists.

The chapter proceeds in three steps. The first two consists of a parallel reading of Geuss and Weber. First, I assess the common ground behind their subversive visions (the fear of the arrival of Nietzsche’s „Last Man” brought about by the effect petrifying social structures have on our thought and creativity). Second, I delineate the differences between Geuss and Weber: the form of subversion theorized by them (in Weber’s case, it is the charisma of political leaders; in Geuss’, mainly the imagination of the theorist, and – in a much smaller degree – the practical imagination of the politician); and the moments that delimit subversive action (in Weber’s case, that is the responsibility of calculating the consequences of our actions; in the case of Geuss, such a moment is missing). Third, I argue that there is a common problem with their views of subversive action: that the relationship of subversion to the existing political order is undertheorized. To remedy this problem, I aim to present a view of charisma and practical imagination where they mutually reinforce each other, and their relationship to the cultural and intellectual resources of the existing order is also sufficiently theorized. I present this view by analyzing the conduct of Charles de Gaulle during the founding of the French Fifth Republic.

The sixth chapter is the conclusion of the dissertation, where I summarize my findings. First, I recapitulate the conceptual contributions of the dissertation to contemporary realism, and how the created ideal types help us in seeing of the multifariousness of realism. Second, to elaborate on the latter point, I review what different meanings can the three realist topoi assume,
connected to different types of political action. Finally, I wage a first step towards creating a "hybrid" realism, that incorporates certain concerns that theorists of the maintaining type of action voice and concerns often found in the realist works about subversive action. I propose a modified version of Isaiah Berlin’s concept of "sense of reality" as a first step towards such a realism.

III. The claims and contributions of the dissertation

1.) Realism and the contingency of action. The central claim of the dissertation is that realists are connected through a special sensitivity towards the contingency of action, which makes them skeptical about universalistic, rationalistic and monistic theories. This can be seen as one of the "family resemblances" that connect realist theories to each other. However, if taken seriously, this sensitivity has further important implications, for example on the autonomy of politics (cf. claim nr. 13.).

2.) The narrow use of the concept of contingency in contemporary Anglo-Saxon realism. Although contemporary Anglo-Saxon realism is distinguished by an interest in the problem of contingency of action, it uses the concept of contingency in a rather narrow sense, as a reference to particular, historically formed circumstances, "which could have been otherwise". Contrary to this use, the original Aristotelian concept (endechomenon, latinized as contingent) was more about present possibilities, that is "which could be otherwise". I argue that while the concept currently used in Anglo-Saxon realism is suitable for analyzing the relationship between existing practices (the political order) and theory, it cannot account for the relationship between these two on the one hand, and (exceptional) action on the other. I aim at giving the concept of contingency greater theoretical range by adopting Kari Palonen’s use, which incorporates both the dimensions of historical particularity and political possibility.

3.) Three types of political action in political realism. The dissertation claims that there are three different types of political action that stand in the focus of contemporary political realism: maintaining, protective and subversive action. While the first is interested in preserving political stability, the second is focused on overcoming instability caused by factors external to the agent, and the third is about creating new political alternatives and thereby questioning the stability of the status quo. Concerning the second and the third types, the dissertation relies heavily on Palonen’s distinction between the Machiavellian and the Weberian Moment, while illustrating the third with certain views of David Hume as presented in the works of contemporary realist Andrew Sabl. At the same time, the dissertation also emphasizes that all three types of action can have different conceptualizations than those present in Machiavelli, Weber and Hume.

4.) The inseparability of ethics and politics in Bernard Williams’ thought. The dissertation claims that Williams’ political theory cannot be fully understood without the background of his ethical thought. His views about the ethic of responsibility are not directed toward a specifically political ethic (an inclination of contemporary realism), but are rather to be interpreted as a manifestation of his general vision about ethical theory. This vision consists in taking into account conflicting ethical and other value claims (e.g. political survival, national greatness), sensitivity to moral loss and the potentiality of tragedy in our ethical life, and emphasizing the
situational parameters of decisions. Additionally, the chapter aims to show that character as a constraint on the contingency of action is not only important for Williams’ ethic, but also for his political theory: because character makes political action minimally predictable, selecting a candidate with an appropriate character should be a central concern of democratic theory. The questions concerning character, integrity and „ground projects”, treated at length in Williams’ 1981 essay volume Moral Luck is a further important connection between his ethical and political thought, up to now underappreciated by realist literature.

5.) Williams as the refiner of the Weberian ethic of responsibility. The dissertation claims that although Williams never presented an elaborate ethic of responsibility, his ethical writings can yield certain refinements for the Weberian concept. First, his views about character and the internalization of social norms can help in somewhat mitigating Weberian decisionism, bringing into attention that when we have to decide between conflicting values, our decision is often not radical, but „grounded” in our character and internalized norms: we are already someone in the moment of decision. Second, because Williams separates impartial ethical requirements from personal „ground projects”, some of Weber’s famous references (e.g. his Luther-reference: „Here I stand, I can do no other”) can appear in a new light. Thirdly, while the intended audience of Weber’s famous lecture on political vocation are future politicians, the ethical vocabulary used by Williams is richer in third-person evaluative terms that do not appear in the moral deliberation of the agent (e.g. virtue terms). This vocabulary can have greater purchase for external observers evaluating the conduct of the agent. This third-person evaluative perspective builds a bridge from the ethic of responsibility towards democratic theory.

6.) The (Neo-Weberian – )Williamsian conceptualization of dirty hands. The dissertation claims that out of Williams’ essayistic remarks on the topic, a conceptualization of dirty hands can be reconstructed, that can serve as an alternative both to Michael Walzer’s original version and its Neo-Machiavellian alternative put forward by Demetris Tillyris in recent years. The Williamsian view can evade Tillyris’ rightful criticisms of the Walzerian view (the latter’s oscillation between value-monism and value-pluralism; its „static” nature that focuses on action instead of character; the irreality and political irresponsibility of the public confession of dirty hands advocated by Walzer), while not embracing the more problematic views of the Neo-Machiavellian view (bracketing the harms caused to citizens in the name of political effectiveness; the reduction of the politician’s character into one dimension; the lack of interest in moral emotions). The Williamsian view sees the ideal political character for a liberal democracy in the Weberian „tragic hero”, who agonises, even hesitates over decisions that entail severe moral loss. The political philosophical background of this view is the liberalism of fear (adopted by Williams from Judith Shklar), which is concerned above all with the powerful causing harms to the powerless.

7.) Constancy and good judgement as the evaluative criteria for the action of democratic leaders in crisis situations. The dissertation claims that from a realist viewpoint, two normative criteria applies in situations where democratic leaders face a crisis situation and are subject to pressure to give up their political projects. The first is the expectation of constancy, i.e. clinging to their projects that won them elections, and overcoming resistance; the second is the expectation of good judgment, i.e. the responsiveness to the changing circumstances and the
views of others around the politician. Although it might seem that there is some tension between the two criteria, I argue that it is right to expect them both: constancy is only a virtue when it is paired with appropriate judgment. At the same time, giving up on a project does not necessarily involve the lack of constancy, granted that the agent tried to stand by his project and took on confrontations before she decided to abandon the project.

8.) The Aristotelian concept of practical deliberation as an important correction of the contemporary realist view of political judgment. The dissertation claims that the concept of political judgment put forward by Raymond Geuss – who is most interested in the topic among contemporary realists – faces some problems, and that the Aristotelian view of practical deliberation (more specifically its particularist reading) can help us correct the shortcomings of his view. First, such a view can eschew the Geussian criticism directed against „moralist” views of political judgment (which see the content of judgment in a quasi-mechanical application of rules on concrete cases), because it can incorporate various goals in its major premiss (e.g. personal projects). Second, while Geuss seems to reduce judgment to instrumental deliberation (where the goal of the action is pre-given and unchangeable), the Aristotelian scheme can describe how taking into account the circumstances of the situation (the minor premiss) can interact with the goals of the actor (the major premiss): the former specifies the latter, and can even lead to abandoning the actor’s project in the light of the circumstances. This way, Aristotelian practical deliberation is more suitable for analysing certain „hard cases” (crisis situations) than the scheme of Geuss.

9.) Political judgment as „grabbling”. The dissertation claims that the metaphor of grabbling (the continuous feeling out of obstacles in conditions of bad visibility) captures better the working of political judgment in a crisis situation than the metaphor of sight, most commonly used in Anglo-Saxon political theory. First, the grabbling-metaphor better captures the sometimes radical uncertainty of the situation, the „fog of war”, when the situation is not transparent to the actor, and she cannot foresee what will happen. This way, it supplies a simple solution to the problem that already occupied Thucydides: how can we imagine political judgment differently than rational planning and foresight (gnōmē), in a way that leaves a greater place to uncertainty (tychē). Second, the metaphor of grabbling can better accomodate the realist requirement of interaction with the facts of the situation, because – as Frank Ankersmit emphasizes – it presupposes a closer interaction with reality, where the touched object itself forms the toucher.

10.) The dystopic elements and blind spots of „claustrophobic realism”. The dissertation claims that the common foundation of Max Weber’s and Raymond Geuss’ political realism is a dystopic vision about ossifying political and cultural structures that delimit human thought. The irony is that this fear, although it endows their position with a substantial polemic and critical potential, at the same time threatens to cause a blind spot in their theory: in depicting order as closed and totalizing, they conceive the relationship of structure and agency as a Manichean dualism, bracketing ways in which subversive action relies on the intellectual resources of the existing order. If we acknowledge this blind spot, we might conclude that the realist analysis of subversive political action could be linked to a different theoretical agenda, the purpose of which would be to describe how charisma and imagination are conditioned by cultural factors and use the cultural resources at hand.
Furthermore, by identifying the fear from the advent of Nietzsche’s „Last Man” as a common ground of the realism of Weber and Geuss, the dissertation uncovers a further way in which Nietzsche’s thought informs contemporary realist thinking (beside the realist insistence on truthfulness, already analyzed by Edward Hall and Matt Sleat).

11.) Charisma and imagination as complementary elements of subverting political stability. The dissertation claims that the concepts of charisma and that of practical imagination can complement each other in analyzing political action: while the latter denotes the intellectual conditions of creating new political alternatives, the former refers primarily to ways in which a political leader can secure a followership for the new alternative. The dissertation shows this possible symbiosis between the two concepts by analyzing Charles de Gaulle’s political conduct between 1958 and 1962, showing in the analysis how his imagination and charisma utilized existing cultural resources.

12.) „Defending the status quo” and „radical social criticism” as false alternatives. The dissertation claims that one of the possible benefits of Weber’s work for contemporary realism is showing that the palette of possible realist positions is much richer than the usual distinction between status quo defending liberal realists (Williams, Sleat, Galston) and radical realists (Geuss and his followers) implies. Although Weber’s realism lays great emphasis on subversive action, there is no trace of any radical left-wing social reform plan in his work. Additionally, he aims at balancing subversive action with the imperative of responsibly deliberating about the potential (and foreseeable) consequences of our actions.

13.) The relative autonomy of the political. The dissertation claims that, seen from the vantage point of contingency of action, the radical autonomy of the political cannot be substantiated, because we encounter a great deal of „isonomy” (similar „laws”) between political and other forms of action. This is best exemplified by the parallelisms between Bernard Williams’ ethical and political theory. However, this does not mean that from a different vantage point, such a radical autonomy could not be grounded.

14.) Political realism and the „sense of reality”. The dissertation claims that the thoughts of Isaiah Berlin about „hedgehogs and foxes”, his value pluralism and his concept of „sense of reality” can be seen as important precursors to the realist movement (the thought of Bernard Williams being the primary link between Berlin and contemporary realism). Additionally, I claim that Berlin’s concept of „sense of reality”, somewhat modified, can serve as a starting point for a „hybrid realism” that integrates some concerns of „maintaining realists” and some preoccupations of „subversive realists”. The modification is needed to secure a greater role to the creative element of political action in Berlin’s concept. I aim to grasp this creative sensitivity through the metaphor of aspect seeing.

IV. Publications of the author connected to the topic of the dissertation


