

SYMPOSIUM  
TYRANNY, DEMOCRACY, AND ECONOMY



OF BLOOD, OIL, AND  
ENGAGED POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

BY  
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## Of Blood, Oil, and Engaged Political Philosophy

Pietro Maffettone

**L**eif Wenar's *Blood Oil: Tyrants, Violence, and the Rules that Run the World*<sup>1</sup> is an important book. It is extraordinarily well written, advancing a fascinating moral and political theory, and using it to offer clear guidance about how to change the world for the better. That guidance is sorely needed.

In this commentary, rather than reflecting on the arguments laid out in *Blood Oil*, I want to focus on what I take to be its deeper aim. My interpretive hypothesis is that *Blood Oil* offers us a different model of political philosophy itself, in the sense that it should be developed for the public, and its aim should be to contribute to moral progress by affecting politics in the real world. Thus, a political philosopher's most important addressees are fellow citizens; and the main task of political philosophy is not simply to search for truth but rather to attempt to contribute to the practical advancement of the moral ideals that constitute the core of one's philosophical vision. If such an interpretive hypothesis is correct, one of the main questions raised by *Blood Oil* concerns the standing of what I shall call engaged intellectual work.

<sup>1</sup> Leif Wenar, *Blood Oil: Tyrants, Violence, and the Rules that Run the World* (New York: Oxford, 2016).

## I

### **Who is Political Philosophy For?**

The philosophical foundations of *Blood Oil* are easy to ascertain, if not explicitly discussed at great length, and should not detain us too long here. Wenar's meso-theoretical conclusions are familiar: the people should rule, and their rule should be limited by the requirements of human rights. But the way in which such claims are explained, situated and defended is highly original. With his concept of 'free unity of ends', Wenar offers an overarching value that can act as a currency within his specific kind of consequentialist approach. Wenar also advances a grand theoretical narrative – of the kind rarely seen in contemporary philosophical works – concerning power and counter-power. A world with greater free unity of ends is a better world, one in which power and the divisions that can fracture the relationships between self and others are tamed. In the world as it is, we can come closer to achieving free unity of ends if we stop allowing murderous regimes to sell natural resources that do not belong to them. Free unity in our world is much better served by popular resource sovereignty.

Yet, while *Blood Oil's* foundations are relatively clear, what is less apparent – but far more intriguing – is why they are offered in the way they are. Why is the book's fascinating and controversial narrative of the human (political) condition told in such broad and bold strokes? Why so many examples about the ills of the resource curse? It would have been (more) straightforward for Wenar to spend several hundred pages detailing the foundations of his theory more explicitly, and in a manner more characteristic of the scholarly political philosophy literature – so why did he choose not proceed in that way?

One possible answer is that the greater emphasis on foundational commitments implies less ability to retain consensus regarding political proposals; thinner, less controversial foundations, as laid out in a more esoteric fashion, might allow readers to form an overlapping consensus about the kinds of policies Wenar wants to put forward. Travelling light on theory might allow one to travel very far.<sup>2</sup> But while there is undoubtedly an element of truth in this, I am not sure I find the diagnosis fully convincing. *Blood Oil* reads very ambitiously, theoretically speaking: among other things, it appeals to a new kind of consequentialism; it offers a new account of the effects of political power on human societies; it develops the idea of counter-powerful principles; it suggests new readings of the canon of political thought (notably Hobbes, Rousseau and Mill); and it develops an original genealogy of international law since the age of Christendom. Light on theory, then, it is not. Overlapping consensus on the need to fight the resource curse, one might add, does not require *Blood Oil's* illuminating political philosophy of modernity. If Wenar's one goal is to convince us that what Teodoro Obiang does in and to Equatorial Guinea is wrong and that we should stop sending him cash in return for (stolen) oil, unity theory does smack of overkill.

So, why does Wenar proceed the way he does? The answer is relatively simple: his audience. I am not Wenar's audience, or, to be more specific, what makes us all his audience is not the fact that we (you and I, here and now) are professional philosophers, but that we are all citizens of real political communities (specifically, Western political communities). Wenar is not simply doing public philosophy, he is doing philosophy addressed to the

<sup>2</sup> Aaron James, 'APA Comments on Leif Wenar's *Blood Oil*' (2016), available at: [www.faculty.uci.edu/profile.cfm?faculty\\_id=4884](http://www.faculty.uci.edu/profile.cfm?faculty_id=4884) (accessed May 2017).

public. The public does not respond well to long and detailed philosophical arguments – so Wenar ensures the philosophical foundations of his work are compact, clear, easy to follow and relate to. The public does not respond well to strings of data in tables, either; they may want to know that such data exists (and Wenar never forgets to tell them where to actually find it), but they also want to know what such data means, and they can grasp this more effectively by following individual cases rather than statistical correlations.

The contrast between Rawls' *Political Liberalism*<sup>3</sup> and Wenar's *Blood Oil* is instructive. *Political Liberalism* wants us to think about the reasonable acceptability of political principles by hypothetical citizens. *Blood Oil* is concerned about those principles being actually accepted by real persons. *Political Liberalism* is concerned with stability. It starts by assuming the existence of a liberal democratic regime, one in which popular sovereignty and a robust class of liberal rights are already guaranteed, and then invites us to consider if that kind of regime can be stable in the right way. *Political Liberalism* wants to offer the intellectual resources needed to preserve a virtuous equilibrium in idealized liberal societies. *Blood Oil* invites to take a hard look at our world as it actually is. It is a place where 'might makes right' is the practical norm governing property rights in natural resources. As Wenar tells us, popular resource sovereignty is already 'all the world's ideal'.<sup>4</sup> Yet popular resource sovereignty is not an ideal to which the vast majority of human beings adhere. The world is stuck in the wrong place. *Blood Oil* wants to offer the tools required to destabilize a pernicious equilibrium in global politics.

<sup>3</sup> John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Wenar, p. 195.

## II

### What is Political Philosophy For?

*Blood Oil* has a different purpose than the standard contribution to academic philosophy. It seems to care deeply, not just in the truth of its ideas, but that its intended audience should be able to appreciate such truth in the fullest possible way. It would be tempting to categorize this kind of approach using the relatively neat terms provided by recent discussions about the nature of political philosophy – to see *Blood Oil* as implicitly committed to a more ‘political’ political thinking, for instance, or as an antidote to the ‘moralism’ which has, according to some, plagued Anglo-American political philosophy.<sup>5</sup> Wenar could be portrayed as starting from real political life, from power, its sources and how it relates to basic institutions such as law and property.

While here, too, there is an element of truth in the idea that Wenar’s work is not part of the ‘moralistic’ genre often exemplified in contemporary political philosophy, my sense is that the reasons for this are merely contingent: *Blood Oil* does take us on a less moralistic journey, but not for the reasons that the ‘new Realists’ often cite as a justification for their theoretical efforts. New Realists and, more broadly, critics of political moralism often ask the following question: What is the nature of political philosophy? Their answer is that political philosophy cannot be applied ethics, or applied moral philosophy. To see political philosophy in that way would, at best, deprive it of its

<sup>5</sup> Bernard Williams, *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Moralism and Realism in Political Argument* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

specificity, and at worst, simply reflect an implausible and impoverished understanding of what ethics and morality are.<sup>6</sup>

Instead, *Blood Oil* seems to ask a different question: What is political philosophy for? It is of course possible to reduce the second question to the first – that is, to think that political philosophy should be devoted to whatever it is that political philosophy is. But the two questions, while they certainly overlap, are not one and the same. Being committed to the idea that political philosophy should take into account the nature and features of real political life from the start (e.g. deep disagreement about the good and the right and the pervasive use of coercive power) does not tell us much about the purpose or function of political philosophy. The historical record seems to confirm the at least partial orthogonality of the two questions. For example, sticking to the well-known ‘Realists’, Weber and Pareto saw social scientists as committed to truth and value-neutrality with respect to the object of study, not political engagement; Machiavelli, on the other hand, worked as a high-level politician and addressed some of his intellectual efforts to a specific set of political leaders. Having a certain picture of the nature of political philosophy does not determine one’s attitude towards its function.

So, what is political philosophy and what is it for? The answer provided by *Blood Oil* seems to be that it is philosophy addressed to the public and its purpose is to shape political reality. As we have seen, knowing what political philosophy is won’t necessarily help us to assess what it is for: the extent to which, for example, political philosophers should be engaged in shaping political reality cannot be deduced by the role such reality should play in

<sup>6</sup> Edward Hall and Matt Sleat, ‘Ethics, Morality, and the Case for Realist Political Theory’, *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 20:3 (2017), pp. 278–95.



theorizing about politics. But, we can perhaps go further than this. We may conjecture that something like the opposite is true: knowing what political philosophy is for might actually provide us with clues about what it is and what it is about. The path from function to nature might be easier to follow or more fruitful than the uncertain one that leads from nature to function.

*Blood Oil* starts from an analysis of how power is abused and how power can be countered to achieve more free unity of ends in the world. And this is not because power is the essence of political life, but because countering power is the essence of making progress towards free unity of ends. The nature of political philosophy is, then, not something we can distil from the nature of politics, but something that follows from the desire to promote a specific picture of how human beings can live together in freedom. What Wenar gives us is a more realistic political philosophy, and yet one with moralistic underpinnings.

Wenar's approach is certainly original in many ways. Yet, allowing for some historical distance from the current professional milieu, Wenar's work follows the way of many canonical works of Western political thought. Exiled, imprisoned, tortured, publicly vilified for their ideas, their lives often threatened and sometimes taken, over the centuries the intellectual giants in the field saw their disputes about the nature of political society as anything but strictly theoretical or limited to narrow technical circles.

### III

#### **The Virtues and Perils of Engagement**

*Blood Oil* leads us away from the shores of professional debates to the sea of political change. In doing so it forcefully re-

introduces the idea of the political philosopher as an ‘engaged intellectual’. Being an engaged intellectual is not necessarily the same as being a political agitator. Engaged intellectuals need not occupy squares – and I think it is safe to say that we won’t see Wenar burning stolen oil in front of the Saudi embassy in London any time soon. Engaged intellectual work is not a reference to a monolithic code of practice.

Can something more be said about *Blood Oil* as a specific form of engaged intellectual work? My sense is that this style of intellectually engaged political philosophy offers us something of a mapping exercise: a clear moral goal to aim towards, as well as lucid directions on how to get there starting from our current location. Topography is key: explaining the destination is one thing, but more important is what kind of terrain we will encounter between where we are and where we need to be. The cartographically inclined engaged intellectual, in other words, is in the business of consolidating reasonable hope for moral and political progress. Knowing that moral progress is possible might make us hopeful. Knowing exactly which steps are required to achieve such progress and that these steps are not out of reach politically speaking might make us feel that our hope is reasonable. In turn, the consolidation of the reasonableness of our hope for moral progress, if shared widely, might actually make the realization of such progress more likely.

Of course, engaged intellectual work can raise concerns. Such concerns have been part and parcel of the ongoing historical conversations among professional thinkers over at least the past two hundred years.<sup>7</sup> My point in outlining and discussing them in

<sup>7</sup> See Norberto Bobbio, ‘Intellettuai’, in *Enciclopedia del Novecento* (Rome: Treccani, 1978).

what follows is to instigate debate rather than argue for a specific or settled conclusion.

Four general criticisms have been levelled at engaged intellectual work. First, it has often been – witness Marxism in the latter half of the twentieth century – the close companion of a certain disregard for pluralism. Engaged intellectualism, that is, often tends to postulate the subject's philosophical commitments as forming part of an unwavering, and at times outright ideological, political vision – a commitment that treats contestation and debate as at best, an obstacle towards progress, and at worst, a pernicious exercise conducted in bad faith. Second, engaged intellectualism asks its participants to shoulder a great deal of responsibility – certainly more than many professional intellectuals today are prepared to accept, and perhaps more than is reasonable to ask. To be an engaged intellectual requires philosophical depth and imagination alongside a commitment to engage with the full complexity of the world. It also necessitates close scrutiny of the development of philosophical thought with regard to how it will be received by the wider public, in a way that professional intellectuals are not necessarily accustomed to. Third, engaged intellectual work, at least when it comes to philosophy, may probe the self-understanding of the discipline about what constitutes its specificity. Engaged philosophical work, some will inevitably complain, is not really philosophy because the training and expertise that it requires are not the kind that most practicing philosophers believe to be central to the social practices of doing philosophy and becoming a philosopher. Fourth, and perhaps most important of all, being engaged might make intellectual work, and philosophical work in particular, less objective. Concentrating on affecting progress in the real world might detract from the required candour and dispassionate attitude that

many philosophers have seen as central to their attempts at discovering truth.

I believe these four concerns can, to a large degree, be mitigated. I do not mean that they are implausible; indeed, some are tangible and felt, if not intrinsically, then at least in certain contingent historical circumstances. Accordingly, we should see them as risks rather than inevitabilities, with probabilities of occurrence that are not always high or fixed; or at the very least, not as foregone conclusions.

The first concern, regarding the connection between engaged intellectual work and intellectual pluralism, is extremely complex. To answer it fully – to give, that is, a historical appraisal of the claim – would require more space than is available here. My view, then, simply stated, is that the connection between intellectual engagement and pluralism is mediated by historical context, the content of the ideals that the engaged intellectuals profess, and the choice of the specific mode of engagement. In other words, lack of concern for pluralism in intellectually engaged work is a contingent feature and one that depends on many variables; it thus cannot constitute a general argument against the approach.

Second, it cannot be denied that engaged intellectuals are required to accept more responsibility; at the very least some responsibility for affecting change in real political life. Many will feel uncomfortable with the idea. The interesting question, though, is whether their discomfort is reasonable. I am not sure. At least as far as political philosophers are concerned, their theories often speak of the virtues of engaged citizenship, of political participation, of the role civil society plays in checking the use of political power. To my knowledge, very few strands of contemporary Western political philosophy laud a conscious refusal to take political life into account. The point then is whether political philosophers should feel a special kind of

‘integrity pull’ – to provide an active example of what they so often seem to praise. This might be reinforced by the fact that political philosophers do not simply praise active citizenship: they are often the people who develop the theories in which active political participation is explained and justified as an activity to be praised in the first place.

Third is the specificity complaint. Once again, I will limit myself to the case of political philosophy. Some will claim that engaged intellectual work in political philosophy is more like sophisticated political activism than ‘real’ philosophy. To my mind, this complaint is largely misguided. Leaving aside the fact that the social practices defining what philosophy is, not to mention the variety of alternative conceptual proposals to define its scope,<sup>8</sup> are in state of continuous flux, the accusation ‘this is not philosophy’ often rings hollow. Even engaged political philosophers can do more than one kind of work. To be an engaged political philosopher does not require the abandonment of technical projects or sophisticated professional discussion; it just signals that these are not the only (or perhaps not the main) point of the activity. Thus, for example, even engaged political philosophers can produce technical writing, followed by less technical explanations of their ideas aimed at connecting with a broader audience. I think it would be strange to refer to the first kind of work as philosophy, but not the second.

Furthermore, the critique seems to assume that philosophy requires well-policed boundaries methodologically speaking – that the discipline cannot accept more than one means of approaching

<sup>8</sup> E.g. Wilfrid Sellars, *Science, Perception, and Reality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963); Bernard Williams, ‘Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline’, *Threepenny Review* 85 (Spring 2001), pp. 8–13.

its goal and developing its tools. Clearly, many philosophers do behave as if this was the case. While I cannot hope to address this here, my sense is that their views often derive from the idea that the acceptance of significant methodological pluralism might make philosophical work less credible. That is certainly a possibility. But it could also be the case that a methodologically more pluralistic philosophical world might lead philosophers to greater focus on what philosophy can achieve than concern over what it shouldn't try to. To be sure, accepting this kind of methodological pluralism does not require one to enthusiastically endorse all of its features. It is compatible, paraphrasing Rawls, with the idea of applying the principle of toleration to philosophical methodology itself. We might dislike some ways of doing philosophy, and yet we may concede that there is reason not to banish them from the scope of the discipline.

Last, and perhaps most important, is the fourth issue concerning truth and objectivity. To be an engaged intellectual, some say, may lead us to lose some of our objectivity, and thus impair what many see as the core mission of intellectual work: to seek truth. This is, once again, an immensely difficult topic which I cannot hope to fully discuss here. In what follows I shall try to offer reasons to doubt that the tension is as stark as some seem to believe. Yet, the point of doing so, to repeat, is not to suggest that these reasons are categorical; rather, it is to start a conversation and to suggest avenues that engaged intellectuals might pursue if they wish to defuse the concerns that are often raised about their way of doing intellectual work. Perhaps the best way to describe what I put forward here is (very) sympathetic agnosticism: whilst the case for engaged intellectual work is not proven, there is much to be said for it, and some reason to doubt that the tension between engagement and truth-seeking is as strong as some conjecture.

One initial thought goes as follows. The extent to which engaged intellectual work might derail the search for truth by affecting objectivity in part depends from the amount of objectivity that non-engaged intellectuals are usually able to muster in their work. In other words, engaged intellectuals might argue that the possible loss of objectivity resulting from their engagement cannot be so significant given there isn't much objectivity to start with. Taken at face value, the critique of engaged intellectual work seems to be made against a fresco painted in excessively bright colours: the idea that intellectuals in general, and political philosophers in particular, are normally capable of being more detached from their thinking than they usually are. One possible reason why political philosophers, for example, might not be immune to deficits of objectivity relates to the sociology of the profession. Many of 'us' tend to become known precisely because we are committed to certain views on specific arguments. Arguing for those views seems, from time to time, a deliberate exercise in developing justifications for a foregone conclusion rather than a pure search for a true answer. And, to be sure, there is nothing necessarily wrong with that. Inference to the best explanation is a legitimate mode of argument; "[w]e often take some considered conviction or judgment as (provisionally) given, and then seek the combination of values or theories or principles that best explains, from a normative point of view, why we might think so-and-so".<sup>9</sup>

Engaged intellectuals may also press a deeper objection. Objectivity, understood as a form of complete detachment from one's arguments or values, is a chimera. Engaged intellectuals might argue that professional political philosophers, for instance,

<sup>9</sup> Andrea Sangiovanni, *Humanity Without Dignity: Moral Equality, Respect, And Human Rights* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017: 8).

develop their views about moral and political principles and values in the same way that most other people do – through socialization, not sheer intellectual discovery. Socialization processes are not, of course, destiny. Yet the idea that a political philosopher might begin her work by simply asking what is the most worthy set of moral and political values and principles in the abstract seems implausible. In fact, a more engaged style of intellectual work might commend itself by allowing for much more transparency and sincerity. Some disagreements might be difficult to resolve through pure argument in part because those who are committed to those arguments find it extremely difficult to negotiate the bases of them.

This, engaged political philosophers might add, neither implies that there is no such thing as truth, nor that political philosophers cannot develop a great deal of critical distance from their initial moral and political commitments. It is rather a reminder that these commitments exist, that they often loom large, that they are seldom the object of constant and dispassionate evaluation, and thus that seeing them for what they are, and caring about their fate in the real world, might not significantly deprive engaged intellectualism of objectivity – there being rather less of it generally than we would care to admit.

Accepting the comparative justification, some may still counter that political philosophers and intellectuals more generally should try to minimize the kinds of circumstances in which their ability to dispassionately search for truth is impaired.<sup>10</sup> This is not entirely convincing. First, it seems to presuppose that the overriding purpose of doing political philosophy and intellectual work more generally is searching for truth. But that

<sup>10</sup> Bas van der Vossen, 'In Defense of the Ivory Tower: Why Philosophers Should Stay Out of Politics', *Philosophical Psychology* 28:7 (2015), pp. 1045–63.



seems to me to beg the question: how exactly are we supposed to know that? Second, engaged intellectualism might incur some costs, but its evaluation cannot be said to be complete without considering the potential benefits. Not to do so would entail proving not only that truth is the weightiest goal of intellectual work, but also that it should take lexicographical priority over all other goals. Finally, the strength of the objection depends in part on the stringency with which we define the idea of intellectual engagement.

If by intellectual engagement we simply mean ‘being a member of a political party, campaigning during elections, making political donations, volunteering in advocacy groups, political community organizing, putting up yard signs, displaying bumper stickers, promoting a political party at dinner parties, generally rooting for one side or another, and so on’,<sup>11</sup> then the tension between objectivity and engagement seems nigh on inescapable. If political engagement is described as a matter of taking sides, objectivity will inevitably suffer. But that is not the only account available. As we have seen, engaged intellectuals can be engaged in many different ways, not all of which seem to necessarily lead to pure partisanship; indeed, many engaged intellectuals will welcome active distrust of political parties precisely because most people, and thus most engaged intellectuals, are aware that they are not the best forums through which to dispassionately seek the truth. Engagement, even engagement with pressing social and political issues, does not necessarily entail links to the formal political system.

In short, it seems plausible to believe that the magnitude of the trade-off between engagement and objectivity is not fixed and

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

depends on the mode of engagement one adopts. Furthermore, even accepting that some trade-off between objectivity and engagement exists, and unless one is committed to the idea that the commitment to truth is lexicographically prior to any other goal when it comes to intellectual work, then a fully considered judgement on intellectual engagement requires an assessment of its potential benefits, not just its costs.

So, what are they? Whatever one's view of the potential risks of being an engaged intellectual (and, more specifically, an engaged political philosopher), there seem to be features of the activity that speak in its favour. I shall cite, but not discuss, three.

First, philosophy and the humanities more broadly are increasingly faced with demands for ever-greater accountability concerning the use of public resources and increased tuition fees (the UK is, in this regard, a clear case in point). Whether we like it or not (and, personally, I don't – because these accountability mechanisms are usually poorly designed and end up distorting work rather than making it more accountable), justifications which make reference to such subjects 'making you a better human being' or funding 'allowing us to search for the truth' seem to have gone out of fashion. Doing engaged intellectual work might make it easier to satisfy these accountability demands; it might allow, for instance, political philosophers to make a stronger case for why philosophy is important both for the public and to the public. Even taking a purely strategic approach to one's relationship with governments' accountability procedures, engaging with them seems the only way to allow resources to steadily flow to the humanities and social sciences.

Second, and more importantly, engaged intellectual work has the potential to do some tremendous good. Clearly, the reverse is also true. But the risk seems worth taking for one simple reason: the risks connected to political engagement do not disappear if

engaged intellectuals fail to take them, they simply get transferred (whatever their magnitude in a specific case) to different people – and these other people are not necessarily better placed to manage the risks in question.

Third, over the long term, engaged intellectual work would allow more intellectually well-trained persons to be ‘in the room’ when decisions are taken.<sup>12</sup> This, of course, is not necessarily a recipe for better policies, but it might bring to bear some of the traditional skills associated with intellectual, and more specifically philosophical, work on the policy process.

## IV

### Arguing About Our Future

As is often the case in life, the best we can do to inspire others is to lead by example. *Blood Oil* does that. What remains to be seen is whether leading by example is the only task that engaged political philosophy can or should set for itself. *Blood Oil* has given a powerful idea to the world: to want more may seem like asking for too much. Neither am I unaware that if one does accept the centrality of engaged work, discussing the philosopher’s role might initially appear to be something akin to pontificating on the meaning of life while one’s house is burning down: perhaps intriguing to start off with, but ultimately irrelevant and unhelpful. Yet this is far from a trivial issue. With specific regard to political philosophy, engaged political thinkers surely believe that there is value in doing it in a certain way; if so,

<sup>12</sup> Ryan Muldoon, ‘Using Philosophy to Improve Development Policy’, talk given at the School of Government and International Affairs, Durham University, 31 May 2017.

they should be committed to the idea that more philosophers follow suit. Clearly, however, fewer political philosophers than one might hope for seem inclined to do so. Surely we should offer them reasons for why they should. And yet, if we are to accept political philosophers for what they currently are, we should address to them arguments that they can evaluate in the style they are accustomed to. The bare arguments alone might not immediately change the way political philosophers approach their discipline. Yet, coupled with the splendid example provided by *Blood Oil*, they could start to win them over.

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