

(False) Friends?

On the Relationship between Political Realism and Agonistic Democracy

*Christof Royer**

Keywords: agonistic democracy, political realism, relationship, divergences, fusion of horizons, realist agonism, new realities

Abstract: This contribution probes the relationship between two prominent approaches in contemporary political theory – namely, the one between political realism and agonistic democracy – and its relevance for the (as the editors of this special section dub it) ‘new realities’ of our age. The point of this article is not to deny that agonism and realism share several core concepts. The point, rather, is that if we analyze these core concepts in more detail we will discover that they play out quite differently in the two approaches and pull agonism and realism in different directions. In many respects, then, agonism and realism are ‘false friends’: their parallels exist only on a superficial level, which renders an ‘assumption of friendship’ theoretically flawed and practically counterproductive. One aim of this paper, therefore, is to lay bare the divergences between realism and agonism on a deeper level. The second purpose, however, is to show that a ‘fusion of horizons’ of the two approaches is by no means impossible. Despite – or rather, because of – the fact that agonism and realism pull in different directions, we can bring them closer together and remedy the weaknesses of the superior approach (i.e. agonism) by supplementing it with elements of realism.

Abstract: Dieser Beitrag untersucht die Beziehung zwischen zwei prominenten Ansätzen der zeitgenössischen politischen Theorie – nämlich zwischen politischem Realismus und agonistischer Demokratie – und ihre Relevanz für die (wie die Herausgeber dieses Themenschwerpunktes es nennen) ‚neuen Realitäten‘ unserer Zeit. Wiewohl Agonismus und Realismus gewisse Kernkonzepte miteinander zu teilen scheinen, argumentiert dieser Artikel, dass wir, wenn wir diese Kernkonzepte genauer analysieren, feststellen werden, dass sie in den beiden Ansätzen unterschiedlich funktionieren und Agonismus und Realismus in unterschiedliche Richtungen ziehen. In vielerlei Hinsicht sind Agonismus und Realismus also ‚falsche Freunde‘: Ihre Parallelen bestehen lediglich bei einer oberflächlichen Betrachtungsweise, was eine ‚Annahme der Freundschaft‘ theoretisch fehlerhaft und praktisch kontraproduktiv macht. Ein Ziel dieses Aufsatzes ist es daher, die Unterschiede zwischen Realismus und Agonismus auf einer tieferen Ebene offenzulegen. Ein zweites Ziel besteht jedoch darin, zu zeigen, dass eine ‚Verschmelzung der Horizonte‘ der beiden Ansätze keineswegs unmöglich ist. Trotz – oder besser: gerade aufgrund – der Tatsache, dass Agonismus und Realismus in unterschiedliche Richtungen gehen, können wir sie näher zusammenführen und die Schwächen des überlegenen Ansatzes (das heißt des Agonismus) beheben, indem wir ihn mit Elementen des Realismus ergänzen.

* Christof Royer, Ph.D., Central European University / Forward College (Paris)
Kontakt: roycr@ceu.edu

1. Introduction

In linguistics, false friends are words that sound or look identical, or at least very similar, to words in one's native language but have a different meaning in another language. This article is about a potential false friendship in contemporary political theory – namely, the one between political realism and agonistic democracy – and its relevance for the (as the editors of this special section dub it) 'new realities' of our age.¹

In recent decades, these two approaches have gained particular prominence in Political Theory. Advocates of the former have celebrated a 'realist revival' (Hall 2020; more critically Scheuerman 2013) which is centered around several correctives to what they see as the moralistic and abstract character of contemporary political theory (Galston 2010; Rossi/Sleat 2014; Sagar/Sabl 2021). Proponents of the latter have diagnosed an 'agonistic turn' (Maxwell et al. 2018) which foregrounds the ethical and political value of certain forms of conflict (the *agon*), a commitment to human plurality, and a tragic vision of politics (Wenman 2013; Wingenbach 2013; Flügel-Martinsen 2020). While serious comparisons of the two approaches have remained few and far between, realists often claim that their approach holds an "agonistic" account of politics (McQueen 2017: 10), and agonists assert that agonism chimes with "a kind of political realism, one that jars with the dominant normative, moralistic, and juridical tendencies in contemporary liberal and deliberative theories" (Wenman 2013: 41). Thus, we can identify in contemporary political theory what I call the (tacit) 'assumption of friendship' of the two approaches: that is, the idea that by sharing a number of core concepts, they converge on a fundamental level, which gives them a common theoretical and practical orientation.²

The point of this article, then, is not to deny that agonism and realism share several core concepts. The point, rather, is that if we analyze these core ideas in more detail, if we 'dig deeper', as it were, we will discover that they play out quite differently in the two approaches and pull agonism and realism in different directions. In many respects, then, agonism and realism are 'false friends': their parallels exist only on a superficial level, which renders the 'assumption of friendship' theoretically flawed. One aim of this paper, therefore, is to lay bare the divergences between realism and agonism on a deeper level. The second purpose, however, is to show that a 'fusion of horizons' of the two approaches is by no means impossible. Despite – or rather, because of – the fact that agonism and realism pull in different directions, we can bring them closer together and remedy the weaknesses of the superior approach (i.e. agonism) by supplementing it with

- 1 Large parts of this paper were written on Corfu (Greece), and I would like to thank the staff members of my favorite beach bar (which must remain unnamed) for drinks, support, and inspiration. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers of the journal, Alexander Weiß, and Andreas Busen for insightful comments and constructive criticism. The usual disclaimer applies.
- 2 I will show in the next section how this assumption expresses itself more concretely. Here it should be mentioned that since agonists and realists hardly engage seriously with each other, there are few explicit statements about this 'friendship'. Matt Sleat, on the other hand, states explicitly that his account of 'liberal realism is not a form of radical democracy' (2013: 147). However, his discussion of their divergences remains sketchy. This article can, thus, also be seen as an elaboration on Sleat's claim through a more serious engagement with agonism.