Conclusion

Speaking about illiberal regimes without the justificatory model

The ambition of this book was to show that it is possible to construct a normative political theoretical account of illiberal regimes that is capable of satisfying two conflicting but (at least from a realist perspective) equally important intuitions about illiberal regimes. One is that illiberal regimes might be very nasty places for people to live in, especially those cherishing liberal democratic ideals. Another is that illiberal regimes successfully pass certain important political-ethical thresholds and, accordingly, provide their subjects with plenty of political-ethical reasons to come to terms with the persistence of illiberal regimes. The book argued that the contradiction between these two intuitions is partly apparent and can be solved, but partly real and needs to be accepted as a central feature of the political-ethical experience of living in illiberal regimes.

The first intuition is not particularly difficult to corroborate with facts. As comparative politics scholars keenly pointed out, illiberal regimes (this book used this term to denote political regimes that are considered in the literature to belong to the lowest tiers of electoral democracies or the upper tiers of electoral autocracies) systematically violate liberal democratic values even if electoral politics retains a constitutive role in seeking popular support for the regime and a considerable role in selecting political leaders. Besides, in illiberal regimes, politics is seen as playing hardball: the opposition has to fight an uphill battle in a skewed political playing field if it wants to successfully contest the incumbent’s hold on governing power. Finally, the main challenge of illiberal regimes is to create and maintain stable political order under the circumstances of a regime-specific set of information and institutional uncertainties. The result is a place where, behind the façade of liberal democratic institutions, the actual political practice is distinctively authoritarian, laws are used as political instruments, opposition is targeted by low-scale violence and oppression, minor infringements of the legal safeguards of free and equal political competitions are quite common, and
the access to media and financial resources is asymmetric. It is only easily
disable political propaganda that apologists of illiberal regimes defend
such regimes as basically regular democracies with local colors, or merely
traduced by its enemies in the hope of politically profiting by applying such
base means. Or is it?

The second intuition is somewhat harder to bear out without misun-
derstandings. It seems a simple fact, for example, that illiberal regimes are
pretty stable forms of political rule (whether they are a distinctively novel
regime type is a question up for discussion yet). But it is not so easy to decide
what to make of this fact. One might reasonably think, for instance, that, all
the well-founded objections to illiberal regimes notwithstanding, providing
stable political order for millions is a virtue of a form of political rule that
might lend considerable ethical seriousness to that regime. However, it is dif-
ficult to defend such an assessment without risking being blamed for status
quo bias or for offering low-bar conclusions about what should be expected
from a political regime.

There are genuine difficulties for any attempts that seek to argue that
the political-ethical experience of living in illiberal regimes cannot be nar-
rowed down to the undeniable facts of unfreedom, oppression, persecution,
manipulation, and corruption. Among the obvious difficulties, it figures
prominently that there is a powerful traditional language for normative
political theory in which we need to distinguish between moral and non-
moral in the first place and in which most reasons to come to terms with
illiberal regimes would count as merely prudential with no ethical signifi-
cance at all. In addition, in this language, we are also supposed to distin-
guish between moral reasons that could amount to a justification of illiberal
regimes and those that justify compliance with their terms on independent
grounds. For instance, in terms of this language, liberal democracy might be
described as morally justifiable as a form of political rule because it ensures
equal human dignity or non-domination for each of its citizens while, in the
same language, it is said to be morally right to comply with a law against
murder even in autocracies because of moral reasons that are independent
of the nature of the political regime in which murder counts as illegal.

Accordingly, this book chose a strategy of challenging this language of
the ‘justificatory model’ (as it was called in Chapter 1) and offered, as an
alternative, a Williamsian (liberal) realist political-ethical language instead,
in which the boundaries between moral and non-moral are less clear-cut
and in which it is not moral justifiability but political-ethical experience
based on a balance of political-ethical reasons for action that plays the cen-
tral role. In other words, a first-person account of politics was offered that
centered around the question of what needs to be done, all things consid-
ered. To achieve this end, many appealing features of the justificatory model
had to be tested and critically revised. Instead of seeking a coherent ethical theory for justifying something in an impartial, rational, and discursive manner, it was argued in Chapters 1 and 3 that Williamsian realism should look for partly incompatible normative contexts providing more or less stable patterns of political-ethical reasons for action in which people find that it makes sense to act in one way rather than in another. It was also argued that some of these normative contexts offer very general or ad hoc reasons while others are related to the necessities of living in a stable political order. Particular political regime types were also said to lay down stable patterns of political-ethical reasons for action, including a unique distribution of political-ethical responsibilities in terms of political offices as well as regime-specific political virtues or dispositions helping people to successfully respond to the challenges of living in a particular regime.

The result is a landscape of various and partly incompatible political-ethical reasons for action, which is a subject of an ethical phenomenological examination with a genealogical edge in the sense that, in a Williamsian realist view, the first question is how to understand what (and why) people might find makes sense as an ethically serious and acceptable form of political rule and then how this reality should affect those who might have good reasons to be discontented with these terms of political rule.

On these grounds, the Williamsian realist answer to the charge of status quo bias was this: the status quo bias accusation conflates two distinct problems. First, it seems reasonable to assume that every stable form of political rule acquires an ethical seriousness by the mere fact of the ethical weight of the pretty good reasons to prefer living under political rule over being under politically unmediated forms of coercion or being dominated, and also because every stable form of political rule needs to pass the test of distinguishability from mere coercion or pure domination. If we insist on calling this claim a status quo bias then I think there is nothing unreasonable about being biased toward the status quo. But only if we do not identify this appreciation for political order with passive obedience to power can we face the implications of this status quo bias in a fair way. This is of utmost importance because the second problem is whether we can have pretty good political-ethical reasons to try to change certain elements of the political status quo or even fundamentally change the terms of political rule despite its success in offering good political-ethical reasons for compliance. Only if we speak the language of the justificatory model does it seem that the first and second problems are closely interconnected. In a Williamsian realist view, we can have a status quo bias in the first sense and be uncompromising enemies of the status quo in the second sense.

Here we have arrived back at our two contradicting intuitions about illiberal regimes. In a Williamsian realist view, illiberal regimes can be both
nasty places we can reasonably criticize and try to undermine on the one hand and stable patterns of political rule that provide people with pretty good political-ethical reasons to come to terms with them on the other. In some sense, there is no contradiction here because we can contend that these two judgments are equally valid on different levels. In another sense, however, these two judgments about illiberal regimes might admittedly be seen as being in contradiction with each other, and we can reasonably claim that such contradictions are common in political-ethical experience.

**What was achieved and what was not**

Numerous things were achieved in the book that, it is my hope, are novel and fruitful contributions to normative political theory in a realist vein. Chapter 1, for instance, argued that it is possible to offer a normative political theoretical framework that remains both evaluative and action-guiding and dispenses with the assumptions of the justificatory model (either in the form of ideal or non-ideal theory) in favor of a Williamsian realism. It also showed that, as realists, we do not need to commit ourselves to a strict separation of political and moral normativity (as strong or radical realism does) because the Williamsian (weak or liberal) version of realism targets the justificatory model of normative theorizing, not the relevance of ethical questions to politics. The main contention here was that realism (both in strong and weak forms) does more justice to the circumstances of politics than any ideal or non-ideal normative political theory based on the justificatory model. It was also Chapter 1 that laid down a methodological proposal – ethical phenomenology with a genealogical edge – that is in accordance with the Williamsian form of realism and is uniquely suitable to explore the political-ethical experience of people living in illiberal regimes by its focus on the primary normative contexts of political agency.

Chapter 2 undertook to offer a realist alternative to the regime theoretical framework of comparative politics in order to find a language that could better express the nuances of the political-ethical experience of living in illiberal regimes and, above all else, accommodate our contradicting intuitions about the ethical seriousness of illiberal regimes. This might seem a hubristic and vain enterprise at first, given that the basic regime concepts of comparative politics are embedded into an immense body of well-established professional knowledge. But, fortunately for us, this book’s ambition has been limited to offering a special-purpose account of political regimes that better fits the normative background assumptions of Williamsian realism and the overall goal of this book of providing a normative political theoretical account of the political-ethical experience of living in illiberal
regimes. Chapter 2 argued that the normative background assumptions of comparative political descriptions of illiberal regimes – as electoral autocracies, competitive authoritarian regimes, or electoral authoritarian regimes – eerily resemble the normative assumptions of the justificatory model, making it a reasonable demand that a realist political ethics should look for an alternative regime theoretical grounding. Chapter 2 picked a neo-Aristotelian regime theory in which illiberal regimes – like all the other regime types – are understood as stable responses to the circumstances of politics rather than characterized by their deviations from liberal democratic norms. In neo-Aristotelian terms, illiberal regimes and liberal democracies can be reasonably called democracies – more precisely, mixed regimes with a robust democratic substratum – but they mix democratic regime characteristics with other regime characteristics: liberal democracies are moderate democracies with a strong emphasis on the rule of the law while illiberal regimes are tyrannical regimes with a strong emphasis on the rule of people. Importantly, neo-Aristotelian regime theory was invoked not to entirely displace the main insights of comparative politics about illiberal regimes (it would have been utterly foolish even to try) but to integrate these insights into a normative political theoretical framework that has essentially different political-ethical implications and can better accommodate our intuitions about illiberal regimes than the normative background assumptions of comparative political regime concepts normally could.

Chapter 3 sought to put together the various tenets of the previous chapters and outline the ‘big picture’ of the political-ethical experience of living in illiberal regimes. First, it argued that it is best to translate the regime theoretical insights of Chapter 2 about illiberal regimes into a set of five principles of action of illiberal regimes that will raise the main – and partly incompatible – challenges to political actors who want to live in a stable political order and pursue their own other goals. There is a (number of points of) stable balance among the egalitarian, competitive, electoral, oligarchic, and self-preservative principles because if there were not, then illiberal regimes could not be as stable forms of political rules as they, as a matter of fact, are. But it does not follow from this fact that there would be any single formula for achieving such a balance or that it would not be a dynamic, ever-changing balance of conflicting reasons based on an ineliminable plurality of values, generating real moral dilemmas and dirty hands problems for political actors all the time. Chapter 3 argued that the most important insights of the comparative politics literature on illiberal regimes can be meaningfully expressed in terms of these five principles of action, from politics as hardball to the existence of real political competition in illiberal regimes to the focus on the central importance of the stability problem for illiberal rulers.
Second, Chapter 3 argued for an exploration of the political-ethical experience that occupies the middle-ground between understanding people in terms of the ‘high’ liberal form of the justificatory model as abstract individuals and seeing people in radically contextualist (Marxist, feminist, communitarian, etc.) terms as selves in social contexts. Two caveats were brought up against adopting a more radically contextualist viewpoint: the methodological caveat was to warn us against too easily dismissing the rich in-between area of political-ethical problems that cannot be grounded in abstract individualism or in the social construction of the self, while the ethical caveat rested on a sense of ethical discomfort with the potential implications of social constructivism to justify unfreedom and dominance in terms of the necessities of social context and its impacts on subjectivity. As an alternative, the chapter argued for the importance of primary normative contexts of political agency that do not necessarily have to fundamentally affect the self of political actors. It was, of course, an unmistakably liberal – but not ‘high’ liberal – rendering of the problem of political-ethical experience.

Third, Chapter 3 offered a bird’s-eye view of various layers of normative contexts: the contexts of general and ad hoc reasons, political rule, political regimes, membership, political offices, and political virtues. The basic tenet of this overview was intended to be that political agency should be seen as constant balancing among a variety of partly incompatible political-ethical reasons rather than seeking an elegant solution to a theoretical puzzle and that the reasons why some status quos might seem to make sense for people living in a political regime can actually come from very different sources. The lesson was not so much that sticking to the status quo should enjoy primacy over other considerations as that real-life political-ethical experience is typically inseparable from the need for providing stable political order either in its current form or in a different form. As a consequence, any journey toward a desirable political order would inevitably take us through a series of particular political-ethical challenges that are always related to the problem of political stability but may or may not have anything to do with the problems of overall moral justifiability in terms of a coherent ethical theory.

With Chapter 4, the book not only left the first part behind but also started to take a closer look at the political-ethical experience of living in illiberal regimes. It focused on the exploration of the political experience of those who hold elected offices or seek to be elected. Chapter 4 characterized this experience as the politics of illiberal ambition: a form of seeking glory and power within the constraints imposed on political actors by the demands of the stability of an illiberal regime. In other words, to be a good elected magistrate, one has to balance the various demands of the five
principles of illiberal regimes in a way that leaves enough room for one to satisfy other demands related to one’s office. To break this complicated formula down into more manageable parts, Chapter 4 introduced a threefold account of the demands of a political office: first, there are the demands of the constitutional purpose of office or, in other words, the demands of acting as a holder of a political office in accordance with the five principles of illiberal regimes; second, there are demands of linkage or, in other words, the demands imposed on one as a holder of a particular office by other people; third, there are demands of integrity or, in other words, the demands of acting as a holder of a political office in a way that can be reconciled with one’s own personal goals and commitments. This threefold framework was accompanied here and in later chapters with an exploration of how well the dispositions of illiberal constancy and illiberal loyalty could serve the holders of various political offices. In Chapter 4, the divergent political-ethical experiences of incumbent elected magistrates and so-called incumbents-in-opposition (elected magistrates belonging to the opposition of the governing party of the regime) as well as challengers who may or may not seek electoral success and who may or may not oppose the regime in its entirety.

Chapter 5 turned to the exploration of the distinct political-ethical experience associated with a family of political offices that draw on an independent source of authority in addition to the demands of constitutional purpose, linkage, and integrity. Three offices were examined more closely: civil servants who appeal to the common good, policy experts who appeal to truth-aptness in the context of a body of professional knowledge, and judges who appeal to justice. This family of political offices is so interesting from the perspective of this book’s main argument because, while these offices are indispensable for illiberal regimes, their independent sources of authority also raise a special challenge to the stability of these regimes which needs to be addressed by providing these office-holders with a variety of political-ethical reasons to come to terms with the regime. The result is a delicate balance of conflicting demands and a family of political offices whose holders can be reasonably expected to have numerous sleepless nights, nightmares, headaches, and chronic indigestion.

Chapter 6 completed the exploration of the political-ethical experience of living in illiberal regimes with an examination of the most numerous and by far the most important office of illiberal regimes: the office of citizens. Here the analysis focused on the specificity of the office of citizens: the fact that it is rooted in citizenship or, in other words, in membership in a polity. Accordingly, Chapter 6 argued that what makes the political-ethical experience of citizens unique is that citizenship has three distinct faces: citizens are not just subjects of political power but also individuals pursuing their own goals in their own rights and they belong to the general constituency of any
form of political rule. As a result, illiberal rulers are in desperate need of providing satisfactory political-ethical reasons for their citizens to accept the terms of the regime because citizens ex officio are in an exceptional position of challenging the stability of the regime without necessarily jeopardizing the constitutional purpose of their office.

All this was achieved in this book, and it is my hope that what was said in the book will prove to be helpful in understanding political-ethical life in illiberal regimes in normative political theoretical (evaluative and action-guiding) terms. Two things were not achieved, however, and it happened primarily because the book was not designed to achieve these two things. One thing that was not achieved was offering a moral justification of illiberal regimes, directly or indirectly. This is partly because I do not consider illiberal regimes to be particularly nice polities in which one should want to live if one could live in a liberal democracy instead, and, accordingly, I did not intend to propose such justification. But it is also because such a justificatory effort would explicitly contradict the most important assumption of the book, namely, that such justification is neither necessary nor sufficient to make any difference in political-ethical terms. In other words, I tried to avoid the mistake of naively believing in the ‘sound of trumpets’ of normative political theory that I mentioned in the Introduction. Another thing that was not achieved was compiling a manual, like an updated and liberal democratic Il principe, for those who want to overthrow illiberal regimes – not just because it would be an impossible task on the grounds of Williamsian realism but also because what I wanted to show in the first place was that even such unfree polities as illiberal regimes could provide a great deal of political-ethical reasons for their subjects to come to terms with the regimes. This goal, of course, did not lead to this book being driven by an antithetical ambition of writing a more conventional update of Il principe for illiberal rulers, either.

I have no regrets about the first unachieved thing. I have found it to be a task neither feasible nor desirable. Concerning the second unachieved thing, however, my feelings are more ambivalent: although both impossible and unintended this time, the idea of a manual for undoing illiberal regimes seems a desirable goal to me. If the analysis of this book is sound, then such a manual should start with the century-old, stark but profound Weberian quip that politics is like slow and passionate drilling through hard boards and should take that quip dead seriously.