

HISTORY AND ILLUSION IN POLITICS

The distinguished political philosopher Raymond Geuss examines critically some of the most widely held and important preconceptions about contemporary politics held in advanced Western societies. In a series of analytically focused chapters Dr Geuss discusses the state, authority, violence and coercion, the concept of legitimacy, liberalism, toleration, freedom, democracy, and human rights. He argues that the liberal democratic state committed to the defence of human rights is a historically contingent conjunction of disparate elements that do not fit together coherently. One of Geuss' most striking claims is that it makes sense to speak of rights only relative to a mechanism for enforcing them, and that therefore the whole concept of a 'human right', as it is commonly used in contemporary political philosophy, is a confusion. This is a profound and concise essay on the basic structure of contemporary politics, written throughout in a voice that is sceptical, engaged, and clear.

RAYMOND GEUSS is Reader in Philosophy at the University of Cambridge. He has taught widely in the United States and Germany, and has been an editor of the series of Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought since its inception. His previous books include *The Idea of a Critical Theory* (Cambridge, 1981), *Morality, Culture, and History* (Cambridge, 1999), and *Public Goods, Private Goods* (Princeton, 2001). He has also published a collection of classical verse in his own English translations, *Parrots, Poets, Philosophers, and Good Advice* (London, 1999).

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-00043-7 - History and Illusion in Politics
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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
 The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
 40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
 Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
 Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2001
 Reprinted 2002 (twice)

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Baskerville Monotype 11 / 12.5 pt. *System* L^AT_EX 2_ε [TB]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Geuss, Raymond.

History and illusion in politics / Raymond Geuss.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-80596-1 -- ISBN 0-521-00043-2 (pb.)

1. State, The. 2. Liberalism. 3. Democracy. 4. Human rights. I. Title.

JC1 I.G4B 2001

320'.01 -- dc21 2001 01 61 71

ISBN 0 521 80596 1 hardback

ISBN 0 521 00043 2 paperback

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Preface

The following text arises ultimately out of lectures on political philosophy for beginning undergraduates in the Faculties of Social and Political Sciences and of Philosophy which I have given in a number of variants here in Cambridge since 1993. Its immediate predecessor, though, was a set of lectures I gave in German at the University in Frankfurt/M during summer-semester of 1999 under the title 'Traditionselemente des Liberalismus'. As befits lectures of this kind I aimed at maximal clarity, immediate intelligibility, and vividness in presenting a general overview of what I took to be a central strand of argument rather than at subtlety, originality, or exhaustiveness of treatment. I have not attempted to eradicate all traces of the origin of this text in oral presentation in the hope that this will allow it to retain some of the advantages of directness and simplicity. For this reason I have also tried to refrain as much as possible from engaging with the enormous, and often helpful and interesting, contemporary literature on political philosophy. My thanks to Prof. Dr Wolfgang Detel and Prof. Dr Axel Honneth, both of the Philosophy Faculty of the University of Frankfurt, for the invitation to Frankfurt and for making my stay there pleasant and instructive.

History and Illusion in Politics may not seem prima facie to be a very obvious equivalent of 'Traditionselemente des Liberalismus' except that I see 'liberalism' as being the main form of contemporary political theory. My interest is in the practical coherence of a certain general framework for orienting political action in the contemporary world. I want to keep in view at the same time two necessities: the necessity of acting coherently in the political world and the necessity of historical understanding of our situation. As a general point I hold that philosophy can provide a practical orientation for politics only if it keeps both of these necessities in focus. In addition I want to claim in particular that there is a fundamental incoherence in the way we think about politics, in the basic tacit assumptions made even by those who disagree most radically on most of

the issues that (rightly) concern those in the world of practical everyday politics.

I owe a great debt of gratitude to my colleagues here in Cambridge, who have provided me with an extremely nourishing environment. My most important intellectual debt is to John Dunn, with whom I have had the privilege of conducting regular seminars on political philosophy during the past five or six years; these seminars have been a continuing source of information and enlightenment for me. Hilary Gaskin gave me detailed comments on several drafts of this manuscript which resulted in significant improvements on virtually every page. I also owe particular thanks to Zeev Emmerich, Michael Frede, Peter Garnsey, Lawrence Hamilton, Ross Harrison, Geoff Hawthorn, Anna and Istvan Hont, Susan James, Gareth Stedman Jones, David Runciman, Beverley and David Sedley, Quentin Skinner, Helen Thompson, and Richard Tuck. None of these people is to be construed as in any way responsible for the remaining deficiencies of this work.