

## Editor's Introduction

WE were almost a year into the pandemic. We knew that the people charged with protecting us had decided to send elderly citizens from hospitals into care homes, untested. We did not yet know that while we were barred from funerals, politicians were getting drunk at illegal parties, making out with their mistresses, puffing their chests in soon-to-be-leaked WhatsApp messages. Every Thursday we clapped for the 'key workers' who would shortly be forced to go on strike during a cost-of-living crisis. Global billionaire wealth was spiking.

We continued to try and teach our students history and political theory, though it had been months since we saw them in person. The talks we organised were attended by names in black boxes. We stared for hours at screens. Questions came over poor connections. ('Lois, I think you're muted'. 'No, still muted'.) After the host hit 'end meeting' we sat in our work shirts and pyjama bottoms, alone.

Normally the end of the seminar is part of its point: the moment when attendees approach the speaker with further questions, email addresses and reading recommendations are exchanged, intellectual connections made. The Oxford Political Thought Seminar, a weekly seminar at the University of Oxford that focuses on the history of political thought and non-analytic political theory, couldn't bring any of this back by fiat. But perhaps, we thought, we could do better than streaming hour-long talks into the digital abyss. So, we began running sessions on 'new books'. The format was simple: two or three commentators – graduate students or post-docs – speaking for five to ten minutes on a recently published book, followed by a chance for the author, and the audience, to reply. Despite being online like everything else in those days, these seminars created forms of mutuality and intellectual connection which many of us craved. The quality was so high and the sessions so popular that what began as a strategy became an institution. And, now, a publication.

The point of *Oxford New Books* is to provide a space for thoughtful discussions of new books in history and theory. While the roundtables we currently publish start life in the Oxford Political Thought Seminar and, soon too, the Critical Theory Seminar, we see no reason why they could not come from similar sessions of other seminars at the University of Oxford – and perhaps, eventually, beyond.

Starting this new journal has been a collective endeavour. The editors are grateful to the authors and the commentators for taking such care with their essays and responses, and in many cases being willing to step far outside their intellectual wheelhouses. We are similarly indebted to the political theorists and the intellectual historians who have agreed to join our Editorial Board, and

especially to those who peer-reviewed the commentaries. The journal would not exist at all were it not for our two Managing Editors, Miyo Peck-Suzuki and Kushti Westwood, who have been on top of everything from editing and typesetting to publishing agreements and submission guidelines.

The books discussed in this first issue range in their interests from Plato, Locke and Marx to Family Abolition and Edward Said. The authors and commentators take on histories of capitalism, colonialism and feminism; they raise old questions about justice, republicanism and martial virtue alongside newer ones about democracy, finance and the limits of political theory itself. Despite this variety of topics, certain themes repeat: the relationship between collective imagination and collective liberation, or about how agents determine or misjudge their own horizons of freedom and possibility.

*Oxford New Books* was conceived during a pandemic; it is born into a world of rampant economic inequality, climate breakdown, and authoritarian entrenchment. As I write, I am haunted by a photograph circulating online of an Israeli soldier sitting on a chair in the Central Library of the Islamic University of Gaza. A machine gun lies on his lap, a book spread open in his hands. Behind him, the bookshelves are in flames. It is a vexed thing to be able to write about new books at a time when some of our colleagues are witnessing the destruction of their texts, archives and libraries; and while many others, in many places, cannot teach and talk about certain books for fear of reprisal. As we launch this first issue, I have these brave readers, authors, teachers, librarians and archivists in mind.

Sophie Smith  
University College, Oxford  
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