



# Oxford New Books

*Oxford New Books* is an online-only, peer-reviewed, open access journal which publishes commentaries on new books in the history of political thought, intellectual history, political theory, critical theory, and political philosophy. All authors are offered the opportunity to respond to the commentaries; if they accept, their responses are published as well.

Currently, the commentaries *ONB* publishes are first presented in ‘new books’ sessions of the Oxford Political Thought and Critical Theory seminars at the University of Oxford.

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## Masthead

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## 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  
June 2024

## Queries On Method And Martial Virtue

Connor Grubaugh  
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THE scale of Melissa Lane’s achievement in *Of Rule and Office* is self-recommending.<sup>1</sup> If you are already persuaded that Plato matters, Lane’s book will introduce you to a Plato you’ve never met before: a Plato every bit as attentive to problems of institutional design, legal order, and political stability as those of epistemic virtue and philosophical education; a Plato who is not indifferent to political forms as long as the philosophers are on top, but keenly aware that means and ends in politics are not so easily disentangled; a Plato, finally, who is not a philosophical enemy of politics but a genuinely political philosopher. As Lane puts it, ‘the rule of knowledge in Plato is the *rule* of knowledge,’ and ‘Plato has as much to say about the nature of rule . . . as he does about the nature of knowledge.’<sup>2</sup> If, on the other hand, you are convinced that Plato doesn’t matter – that his convictions are so far from ours that he can no longer speak to us – then read *Of Rule and Office* for a serious challenge. Here is a Plato who recognised that the difficulty of ‘how to keep a political order oriented toward the good of the ruled’ is one that inheres in ‘any kind of political constitution,’ including modern liberal democracy.<sup>3</sup> Lane stresses that she does not endorse all of Plato’s solutions to the proverbial ‘Juvenal conundrum,’ but she insists that there is something to be gained from the exercise – at once historical, interpretive, and philosophical – of seeing the problems his way.<sup>4</sup>

Seeing things Plato’s way is easier said than done. The history of rival approaches to his texts is long and riven with controversy. Lane’s success is built on the strength of her methods – but they are not always easy to discern. I’d like to begin by drawing them out.

Consider how she sets the scene: Lane depicts Plato as the inheritor of a longstanding ‘tradition’ of writing about the purpose, or *telos*, of rule (*archè*), and of an equally longstanding set of practices and institutions (*taxeis*) establishing ‘an ordered set of roles and relationships . . . through which [the] *telos* [of rule] might be achieved’.<sup>5</sup> Rule in itself, on the traditional view,

<sup>1</sup> A version of this commentary was first presented on Friday 13 October 2023 in All Souls College, Oxford at a roundtable on Melissa Lane, *Of Rule and Office: Plato’s Ideas of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Melissa Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 26.

<sup>3</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 31.

<sup>4</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 6-8; 34.

<sup>5</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 17-18.

consisted in the ‘power of creating *taxis* by issuing an *epitaxis*,’ an ‘order in the sense of command’.<sup>6</sup> Crucially, however, *archē* in some grammatical forms could also refer to ‘offices’ and ‘officeholders,’ a specific way of organising rule through the distribution of epitactic power to public officials who are held accountable for their actions through power-sharing, performance audits, and other means.<sup>7</sup>

Lane then identifies two historical trends in Greek political thought that set the stage for Plato’s intervention. The first is the emergence of intellectual challenges by sophists and teachers of rhetoric to the traditional notion that the *telos* of rule is to serve the good of the ruled, reflected in the Homeric image of the king as shepherd. Thrasymachus in Book 1 of the *Republic* gives voice to one strain of these ‘debunking argument[s]’ designed to expose the traditional view as little more than empty moralism.<sup>8</sup> The second trend is the increasing use of offices as an ordering principle for political rule: not only in democratic Athens, but elsewhere too, there was a turn from the mid-fifth century onwards away from ‘unaccountable’ rule in the form of kingship and tyranny toward ‘accountable’ officeholding within legal, customary, and constitutional frameworks.<sup>9</sup>

Lane’s methodological commitments come into view as she works to situate Plato in this context. In addition to the language of tradition and inheritance, she also speaks of received ‘vocabularies’<sup>10</sup>, ‘linguistic affordances’<sup>11</sup>, ‘paradigms’<sup>12</sup>, and ‘patterned usages’.<sup>13</sup> Taken together they constitute an ‘evaluative nimbus’ of Greek attitudes toward rule.<sup>14</sup> Elsewhere, she asks us to imagine Plato strolling through a statue gallery populated by the various ‘figures of rule’ in the Greek imagination: kings and tyrants, officeholders and constitutions, and so on.<sup>15</sup> She argues that Plato ‘conserve[d]’ the Homeric tradition and preexistent officeholding system in some areas, while he ‘renovate[d]’ and ‘reconfigure[d]’ ‘exploit[ed] and extend[ed]’ it in others, combining aspects of ‘immanent’ and ‘rejectionist’ social critique.<sup>16</sup>

The meticulous effort Lane puts into faithfully reconstructing Plato’s context makes clear that she considers it a prerequisite to interpreting him correctly. But I would not call her a contextualist. For she is equally clear (and here the metaphor of the statue gallery is revealing) that Plato was not a victim of his context. Rather, on Lane’s view, he was capable of comprehending it (at least in part) and seeing it for what it was, as a spectator of sorts. This conviction leads Lane to make a hermeneutic presumption in favour of Plato’s extraordinary abilities as a thinker and writer – to a far greater degree than

<sup>6</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 52.

<sup>7</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 3-4, passim.

<sup>8</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 48-53.

<sup>9</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 53-64.

<sup>10</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 35, 42ff.

<sup>11</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 4, 45, 66.

<sup>12</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 53, 67.

<sup>13</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 45.

<sup>14</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 19, 25, 37, 41, 49, 65.

<sup>15</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 45-46.

<sup>16</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 64; 35; 66; 25-26; 82-83.

might be permitted, for instance, in the Ideas in Context series from Cambridge University Press. She portrays Plato's 'literary universe' as 'painstakingly crafted' and refers favorably at one point to M. M. McCabe's judgment that 'Plato wrote nothing in vain'.<sup>17</sup> Rather than treating Plato as an object of historical research alone, Lane sees him as a 'guide' to thinking through the subject of rule and office in which they share a common interest.<sup>18</sup> Here I take Lane to be suggesting that when we are dealing with a thinker as exceptional as Plato, we cannot assume that we have a greater mastery of the context than he did, and hence no amount of contextual data can release us from the task of textual interpretation, which is inevitably dialogical. In her refusal to let Plato's context swallow his texts, she reminds us that reconstructing context – however necessary to set interpretation in motion – is for the sake of understanding the text, rather than an end in itself.

Lane's interpretations are creative and challenging. She effectively dismembers Karl Popper's argument in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945) that Plato was the ur-source of modern totalitarianism. Popper claimed that Plato's sole political interest was in the answer to the question: 'Who should rule?' Everything else was only a matter of 'technology' and utopian 'social engineering'.<sup>19</sup> To be fair, Popper was far from alone in his opinion that Plato 'hated the individual and his freedom'.<sup>20</sup> Isaiah Berlin and Hannah Arendt also frequently denounced Plato for an alleged abhorrence of pluralism, and both followed Popper in using the image of an 'Archimedean point' *outside* the world—from which leverage can be exercised *over* the world – to illustrate what they regarded as Plato's dangerous instrumentalization of the political.<sup>21</sup>

Lane builds her response in careful interpretations of Plato's *Laws*, *Statesman*, and *Republic*.<sup>22</sup> To summarise: First, Plato both conserves the traditional 'service conception' of rule as aiming at the good of the ruled and further specifies this good as the virtue of each individual citizen.<sup>23</sup> Contra Popper's critique of technicity, Lane emphasises that Socrates's analogy between *archē* and *technē* in *Republic* 1 extends only to a subset of crafts or professions that can be classified as 'interpersonal' or 'therapeutic.' Here, the craftsman *qua* craftsman cannot benefit from abusing and exploiting his craftwork, because his object is also a patient.<sup>24</sup> Such crafts offer an example of a type of relationship in which 'rule and freedom can become compossible

<sup>17</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 75.

<sup>18</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 8.

<sup>19</sup> Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 1:21-23, 99-101, 114-116, 119-121, 147-157.

<sup>20</sup> Popper, *Open Society*, 1:156.

<sup>21</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*, ed. H. Hardy & R. Hausheer (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997), 3-5, 29, 64, 238-239, 282, 312, 326-327, 495-496, 557; Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 11, 14, 20, 204, 220-230, 237-238, 248, 257-268, 269, 284, 287, 319, 302-304, 322-323; *Between Past and Future*, exp. ed. (London: Penguin, 1968), 278-279.

<sup>22</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, Chs. 3-9.

<sup>23</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 20-21; 90.

<sup>24</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 149ff.



through willing obedience'.<sup>25</sup>

Second, while the *Statesman* departs from the *Laws* in acknowledging that reliance on procedural mechanisms of official accountability is inadequate to the end of civic virtue, and the *Republic* internalises this critique, the *Republic* does not abandon offices and officeholding as one element of the *taxis* of rule. On the contrary, to give just one example among many, even the philosopher-kings reign by rotation in time-limited terms.<sup>26</sup> The reason, as Lane explains, is that Plato views *taxis* as a good internal to the *telos* of virtue. Every good constitution must possess an institutional order well-suited to its end.<sup>27</sup>

Lane concludes her book with a stirring defence of the virtues of rule against its modern critics. She chides a raft of theorists for imagining that rule is something they can do without: from Rousseau, Engels, and Lenin to contemporary democratic theorists, including agonists like Bonnie Honig and relational egalitarians like Niko Kolodny, to post-Marxians and postmodernists including Claude Lefort, Jacques Rancière and Judith Butler. As Lane puts it: 'One cannot hide behind a Rousseauian formula in which obedience to laws means that one only obeys oneself. Rather, any such move . . . can only obscure the painful and difficult fact that constitutional order – including officeholding – requires some human beings willingly to obey others'.<sup>28</sup> The question for Plato, she explains, is not whether or not to have rule at all, but whether and how the hierarchical relationships of rule 'can be made ethically valuable' by conforming to the good.<sup>29</sup> There is no mistaking the jeremiad in the book's final pages: We citizens of modern democracies have forgotten how to command and obey, how to rule and be ruled in turn. We oscillate between anarchism and tyranny, the absence of rule and the obliteration of rule by pure coercion. The problem is that tyranny gets the *telos* wrong, which vitiates its *taxis*, while anarchy cannot achieve its *telos*, because it has no *taxis* at all.<sup>30</sup> So we have Bakunin in the morning and Hobbes (or Weber) in the evening, all while rejoicing with Rousseau that at least we *obey* nobody.<sup>31</sup>

Lane does acknowledge one notorious obstacle to accepting his account of rule: his repeated comparisons between rulership and slavery in Book 9 of the *Republic*.<sup>32</sup> She handles this objection well by admitting that Plato's uncritical attitude toward actually existing slavery in his time was 'morally odious,' while pointing out that slavery's argumentative function in the *Republic* is either to denigrate tyranny as a form of unjust rule or to illustrate only the epitactic power of rule, without reference to its *telos*.<sup>33</sup> Yet there may be at least one more feature of the Platonic conception of rule, and the possibilities of

<sup>25</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 381.

<sup>26</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 238-43.

<sup>27</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 317.

<sup>28</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 380, 397-408.

<sup>29</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 404.

<sup>30</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 409.

<sup>31</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 130, 377, 380-81, 406.

<sup>32</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 362-75.

<sup>33</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 372.

freedom to which it gives rise, that makes it difficult to translate into a modern context. If historians like Oswyn Murray and Hans van Wees are to be believed, there is another side to the story about the emergence of the classical *politeia* and its system of officeholding from the archaic period that Lane describes in her second chapter. From the new style of hoplite warfare, which required coordination and concentration in mass, there also emerged a new duty of obedience to the city as a whole – no longer, as in Homer’s fading world, to one’s kin and lord.<sup>34</sup> There is a reason why Benjamin Constant said that the liberty of the ancients was bought at the ‘price of war’ and consisted chiefly in ‘deliberating . . . over war and peace,’ which was the ‘constant interest, the almost habitual occupation of the free states of antiquity.’<sup>35</sup> At least one place where rule and freedom became compossible for the Greeks, perhaps the typical place, was on the battlefield. Yet as Plutarch understood, this inability to disentangle their civic ideals from highly particularist forms of martial virtue lay at the heart of their eventual tragedy: it stymied any capacity to confederate, or extend the bounds of rule beyond the walls of the *polis*.<sup>36</sup>

There is evidence of a similar belligerence in Plato, often precisely in those passages where he is keenest to defend the virtues of willing obedience. The guardians in the *Republic* are first introduced to us as warriors who fight to ‘enlarge the city’ so that it can become truly ‘luxurious,’ no longer fit only for ‘pigs.’<sup>37</sup> We are never told who is standing in the guardians’ way, or what price they will pay for the misfortune, though it is certain to be a fate worse than being ruled. It is also perhaps too rarely observed that when Socrates in the *Timaean-Critias* turns away from discursive legislation of the ‘city in speech,’ and requests from his interlocutors an account of the city ‘in motion’ (*kinoumena*), enacting its ‘education and training’ both ‘in word and deed’ (*te en tois ergois praxeis kai en tois logois*), he explicitly identifies this state with a condition of war.<sup>38</sup> If Plato takes hierarchies of command and obedience to be inevitable features of political rule, as Lane argues, I wonder if he also thinks the same of warfare against the unruly. Does the compatibility of freedom and rule, for Plato, amount in the end to marching in step? If so, what does this suggest about the compatibility of his conception with modern ideals, and his usefulness as a guide for modern people? It may be that the horizon of freedom in Plato is more limited than we would hope. To confront Plato’s idea of the political anew, not just historically but dialogically, is thus in part to ask whether such hopes are well-founded. Here as elsewhere, Lane may wish to challenge our intuitions – or perhaps this is where Plato ceases to be her guide. In any case, this is not so much an objection as an invitation to elaborate on

<sup>34</sup> Oswyn Murray, *Early Greece*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Fontana 1993), 124-136; Hans van Wees, ‘Citizens and Soldiers in Archaic Athens’ in A. Duplouy & R. Brock (eds.) *Defining Citizenship in Archaic Greece* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 103-144.

<sup>35</sup> Benjamin Constant, ‘The Liberty of the Ancients as Compared with that of the Moderns’ in *Constant: Political Writings*, ed. B. Fontana (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 311-313.

<sup>36</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Cimon*, 19.2-3; *Life of Agesilaus*, 15.1-3, 16.4; *Comparison of Philopoemen with Flamininus*, 1.

<sup>37</sup> Plato, *Rep.* 372d-373e.

<sup>38</sup> Plato, *Tim.* 19b-20c.

her thesis in this challenging and brilliant book.

## Guarding The Guardians

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IN *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Karl Popper made a series of vigorous and influential criticisms of Plato.<sup>1</sup> Melissa Lane summarises one of them in *Of Rule and Office: Plato's Ideas of the Political*: that Plato fails to attend to the project of a procedural limitation of power. For Popper, Plato cares only about who should rule and so neglects the importance of how that rule ought to be ordered.<sup>2</sup> One aim of Lane's book is to suggest that this a misreading. At the heart of her argument is the claim that Plato consistently engages with the very questions Popper suggests he ignores: How do we prevent abuses of power? Or the classic question from Juvenal's satire: Who will guard the guardians?<sup>3</sup>

What are we to make of Plato's engagement with these questions? At least two answers emerge from *Of Rule and Office*. On the one hand, there is the strong reading. On this view, questions about accountability and institutional safeguarding are Plato's primary preoccupations and a fundamental contribution of his political theory is a procedural constitutionalist account of how rule can be made to serve the good of the ruled. On the other hand, the book supports a potentially weaker claim: that Plato's character 'avatars' are simply exploring many potential theoretical and constitutional commitments, one of which is a commitment to a kind of classical constitutionalism. Here Plato himself is not best read as an advocate of procedural constitutionalism, but as an author who voices the case for it.

We might think that one thing which is at stake between the weak and the strong claim is the question of what Plato is doing. Does he explore questions of institutional safeguards and accountability insofar as these were things a well-born Athenian citizen simply had to discuss? As Lane points out near the beginning of the book, most city-states in Plato's day were organising themselves around office and accountability; classical constitutionalism would have been, for him, part of mainstream political discourse, perhaps an

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this commentary was first presented on Friday 13 October 2023 in All Souls College, Oxford at a roundtable on Melissa Lane, *Of Rule and Office: Plato's Ideas of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023). See Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963 [1945]).

<sup>2</sup> Melissa Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 27.

<sup>3</sup> Juvenal, *Satura* VI.345.O30 in *Juvenal and Persius* trans. Susanna Morton LCL (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 266. Juvenal's question arose from his musings on how one might keep one's wife faithful: you can give her a guardian, but then who will watch him? The phrase has had a second life as a challenge to ways of arranging checks on power.

inescapable part.<sup>4</sup> Alternatively, is Plato offering us something more: is he actively trying to advocate for the importance of safeguards and constitutionalism? Is the case for constitutionalism part of the intervention of his political theory?

In *Of Rule and Office*, Lane proves the weaker claim beyond doubt – that Plato does, in his dialogues, show an interest in accountability, safeguarding, and office-holding. We might wonder, however, whether the weak claim is enough to defend Plato from Popper’s criticism. Popper’s claim concerned Plato’s own project – the model of rule and governance that we have reason to believe Plato himself was trying to defend. In making the case that Popper is wrong, Lane does seem to want, then, to defend the stronger claim: that Plato wants to give an account of constitutional rule that cares about how rule is ordered – not just who is doing the ruling.

Before we can endorse the stronger claim, I’d like to look at some passages from across Plato’s work that we might think trouble it. Take, for example, Book Eight of the *Republic* which discusses the degeneration of cities.<sup>5</sup> Here, Plato says that even in the beautiful city, the kallipolis, which is supposedly stable, leaders may fail to properly practice the ‘kairos’ which is so crucial to statecraft.<sup>6</sup> That is, they fail to properly time their decisions, in particular when it comes to procreation, and this leads to a generation of children who are not quite worthy to serve as guardians. This begins a kind of chain reaction from which the city degenerates first to timocracy, then to oligarchy. How should we think about Plato’s view of what goes wrong in these cases? It seems quite hard to say this degeneration a failure of procedure or institution. What has gone wrong, on Plato’s account, does not appear to have been preventable by safeguarding or auditing. Instead, the problem does seem to turn on *who* is ruling – not how that rule is ordered. When we find ourselves in the second stage of degeneration, in an oligarchy, Lane points out that institutionally, things still look timocratic: that is to say, the institutional framework of the timocratic constitution has not changed.<sup>7</sup> What has in fact changed, on Plato’s own account, is the quality of people within that constitution. Is the focus not (as Popper might insist) still on who is ruling, and not the framework within which that ruling is being done?

We could, perhaps, push this reading even further. Lane shows decisively that Plato was certainly engaged in contemporary conversations about institutions, accountability, and safeguarding. But might his point have in fact been to impress upon his readers the inadequacy of these measures? While constitutional constraints might prevent some instances of malfeasance and greed, they do not – and cannot – prevent the worst degeneration of the cities.

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<sup>4</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, Ch. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Plato, *Republic* VIII.546 trans. G.M.A. Grube in *Plato: Complete Works* ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997); Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 273.

<sup>6</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 273.

<sup>7</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 287. In her words: ‘In short, the majority of timocrats now elect to the office not the warlike but the wealthy. Its institutions are still the same at this stage, but the people who are chosen to hold the offices within them—and so to shape the overall regime in line with their political predominance—are of a fatally different breed’.

That degeneration happens not when there isn't enough auditing or guardianship, but when the mechanisms of education to virtue fail. That is: when the wrong people are in the wrong roles. We might imagine here that Plato is speaking to – and perhaps criticising – his contemporary situation, in which forms of classical constitutionalism proliferated. On this reading, perhaps Plato is giving his contemporaries a warning about the dangers from which these safeguards ultimately cannot protect them.

**A**T this point a sceptic might want to trouble this entire interpretative endeavour. Identifying exactly which claims we can attribute to Plato is notoriously difficult. A wonderful insight from Melissa Lane's second book *Plato's Progeny: How Plato and Socrates Still Captivate the Modern Mind* (2001), is just how many different political accounts you can get from reading the same Platonic dialogue.<sup>8</sup> Readers have taken Plato to be a communist; a totalitarian apologist of absolute rule; or, as on Jill Frank's recent account, an advocate for ethical and political self-governance.<sup>9</sup> We might wonder about the extent to which it should trouble us that we get these extremely different substantive outcomes from reading the same Platonic dialogues. Indeed, how should we understand Lane's present book in these tussles over which politics Plato supports? Is it a project to show that, all along, Plato has in fact been the authority we need for a liberal constitutionalism?

As Lane explores in Chapter 2 of *Of Rule and Office*, the question of what we can attribute to Plato – and on what grounds – is an old and vexed methodological issue in Plato scholarship. Can we say that any one character in a Platonic dialogue ever represents Plato's views? To what extent can we speak of a Platonic view at all? Some scholars, like Michael Frede, ask whether the dialogues represent a kind of special case of authorship, suggesting that their very structure – as dialogues rather than texts obviously written in Plato's voice – troubles our desire to attribute particular claims which emerge from the text to Plato himself.<sup>10</sup> This approach might be unsatisfying to readers of Plato who feel that there is some kind of distinctive Platonic voice which emerges from the texts – but the puzzle then is to determine where and how this voice can be identified.

While one might imagine that these anxieties about Platonic attribution stem from specifically 20<sup>th</sup>-century methodological turns in both philosophy and the history of thought, we can in fact chart their history back to Plato's Academy itself. We know that Arcesilaus, a member and later a leading figure,

<sup>8</sup> Melissa Lane, *Plato's Progeny: How Plato and Socrates Still Captivate the Modern Mind* (London: Duckworth, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Jill Frank, *Poetic Justice: Rereading Plato's Republic* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019).

<sup>10</sup> Michael Frede, 'Plato's Arguments in the Dialogue Form' in Julia Annas et al (eds), *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 201-220. In Frede's words: '...the form of a Platonic dialogue is such that the mere fact that an argument is advanced in the dialogue does not yet mean that it is endorsed by Plato. To decide whether it is, we have to go by circumstantial evidence, by what we know about Plato's views, by clues offered by the dialogues. And this, notoriously, can be very difficult indeed' (203).

offered a staunchly sceptical approach to reading Plato, resisting the idea of dogmatic attribution. Cicero too suggested that Plato is a sceptic to whom nothing is attributable.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, as Lane points out in a footnote, there are other ancient readers of Plato who had no qualms about attributing claims to him, such as the Greek biographer Diogenes Laertius and the Roman grammarian Aulus Gellius.<sup>12</sup>

Fast forward two thousand years and we find ourselves circling similar questions about Plato: how – and whether – we can speak explicitly of a Platonic thought; what the relationship is between Plato and his characters; and which claims are his, if any. As Lane points out, there has been much criticism from scholars like Jane Gordon levied at any approach which identifies certain characters as ‘mouthpieces’ of Plato which simply speak for him.<sup>13</sup> Yet despite all the criticism of this approach, Lane notes that it is difficult to find any of our contemporaries actually using it.<sup>14</sup>

The methodological stalemate on these questions makes it exciting to come to a sentence in a book about Plato that is so bold in its interpretative approach: ‘I unabashedly attribute views to Plato despite the fact that he is not writing assertorically in his own voice.’<sup>15</sup> Lane proposes to do so via what she calls the ‘avatar approach’. The avatar approach suggests that we think of specific characters in the Platonic dialogues as ‘avatars’ of Plato through which he is able to investigate a range of claims in different contexts, just as someone who plays a video game more than once can explore different options.<sup>16</sup> In this way, we can understand characters like Socrates and the Eleatic Stranger as Plato’s avatars through which he gives himself the freedom to explore.

The approach – intuitively appealing as it is – leaves open some questions about how the idea of ‘avatars’ might help to resolve existing methodological qualms when it comes to questions of attribution. How, for example, should we move from identifying what Plato is simply exploring via his avatars to, in the book’s words, ‘unabashed attribution’? Does the avatar approach take us from exploration to attribution? If yes, how should it escape the criticisms which Gordon and others make of the mouthpiece approach? If not – that is, if its purpose is not to help us with attribution, but instead to identify claims which Plato is interested in exploring – then how is the avatar approach

<sup>11</sup> Cicero, *Academica* II.72-75. See Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods / Academics* trans. H. Rackham LCL (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933), 561. Though in II.74 Cicero advances a skeptical reading of Plato (and Socrates), he couches it in a bizarrely *unskeptical* comment about the depth of his knowledge about them: ‘...can I speak with more certain knowledge about any persons? I seem to have actually lived with them, so many dialogues have been put in writing which make it impossible to doubt that Socrates held that nothing can be known; he made only one exception, no more—he said that he did know that he knew nothing’. [*An de ullis certius possum dicere? vixisse cum iis equidem video: ita multi sermones prescripti sunt e quibus dubitari non possit quin Socrati nihil sit visum sciri posse; except unum tantum, scire se nihil se scire, nihil amplius*].

<sup>12</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 74 fn. 85.

<sup>13</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 74 fn. 85.

<sup>14</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 74 fn. 85.

<sup>15</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 30.

<sup>16</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 75.

methodologically different from a general attentiveness to the narrative structure of the dialogues and what is being said in them? What does the avatar approach allow us to claim distinctively?

It is rare to find so much that is at once new and challenging in a re-examination of texts which have been read and re-read with close attention for thousands of years. Lane's book is a much-needed challenge to the very familiar ways of reading Plato which allege that he had little to say about the nature of rule, its vulnerability to corruption, or how it might be organised in the pursuit of the good of the ruled. As she writes in Chapter 1, Plato's treatment of these issues has simply been 'hiding in plain sight.'<sup>17</sup> Whether we attribute the constitutional case to Plato or not, it is clear that Lane's careful examination has uncovered a heretofore ignored aspect of Plato's meditations on the political.

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<sup>17</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 10.



## Author's Response

Melissa Lane  
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A YEAR before delivering the 1986 Carlyle Lectures at Oxford, Judith Shklar introduced the second edition of her classic study of Rousseau by remarking that she had ‘come to accept that he is one of those authors who says something personal to every reader’, such that ‘it is both vain and illiberal to insist that one’s own reading is the only right one’. Rather, as a scholar, one can aim at most to act as ‘a guide to others to come to their own understanding of Rousseau’s messages’.<sup>1</sup> The commentaries by Connor Grubaugh and Miyo Peck-Suzuki encourage me in believing that my own monograph, based on the Carlyle Lectures that I delivered in 2018,<sup>2</sup> can serve as such a guide for readers of Plato, given both commentators’ perceptive insights into my argument as well as their challenging questions.

As the commentators observe, the monograph is organised around the closely related ideas of rule and office, which in ancient Greek were focally expressed with the same vocabulary (*archē*, *archein*), with the context (including syntactic clues) serving to distinguish between the two senses. In contrast to more general and potentially untrammelled kinds of rule, I construe office as a kind of rule that is characterised by ‘limited political powers’, limits that in ancient Greek constitutions typically included the constraints imposed by annual accountability audits (*euthunai*).<sup>3</sup> I analyse each form of rule, including constitutional rule organized through offices, in terms of two dimensions: as a *taxis* (order) oriented toward a *telos* (end or purpose), where the latter for Plato as for a wide swathe of Greek texts from Homer onward was assumed to be properly the good of the ruled (even though that assumption was often undermined or challenged).

In this context, Connor Grubaugh illuminatingly remarks that I show Plato to have been ‘keenly aware that means and ends in politics are not so easily disentangled’, and puts my fundamental point more pithily than I did: ‘tyranny gets the *telos* [of rule] wrong, which vitiates its *taxis*, while anarchy

<sup>1</sup> Judith N. Shklar, *Men and Citizens: A Study of Rousseau’s Social Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985; first edn, 1969), vii.

<sup>2</sup> It was a special honour to do so in the footsteps of Shklar, from whom I had been so fortunate to learn at Harvard University as both her student and undergraduate thesis advisee, as well as those of the 1980 Carlyle Lecturer Quentin Skinner, from whom I was equally fortunate to learn at the University of Cambridge where he became a mentor, colleague and longtime friend.

<sup>3</sup> Melissa Lane, *Of Rule and Office: Plato’s Ideas of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), 3-5 and *passim*.

cannot achieve its *telos*, because it has no *taxis* at all.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, I argue that Plato saw, and showed, that while it is crucial to grasp the proper *telos* of rule, doing so neither exhausts political philosophy nor ensures good political rule.<sup>5</sup> Rather, each of the three dialogues discussed in the monograph (*Republic*, *Statesman* and *Laws*) explores a different answer to the question of what kind of *taxis* might sufficiently robustly secure the *telos* of rule, each of them ‘reconfigur[ing]’ various existing political models in exploring alternative ways of better orienting a *taxis* of rule to the securing and safeguarding of its *telos*.<sup>6</sup>

It is this attention to *taxis* as much as to *telos* that, as Grubaugh nicely puts my view, makes Plato rightly count as ‘a genuinely political philosopher’. To be sure, while highlighting this contribution of the book, Grubaugh also poses a significant challenge to its normative import for contemporary political theorising. He puts the point as follows: that what I call the ‘compossibility’ of rule and freedom was in practice interpreted as made possible by, and confined to, the military and political ordering of a particular Greek *polis*.<sup>7</sup> Grubaugh points to Plato’s *Timaeus* (19b-20c) as indicating the intention to present the city of the *Republic* ‘in motion’ in the context of war, and one might also point to the fact that the guardians are originally introduced into the city founded ‘in speech’<sup>8</sup> as military guards needed for offensive as well as defensive purposes.<sup>9</sup> This highlights a limitation of my formulation of the *telos* of rule as ‘the good of the ruled’, namely, that this fails to register concern for anyone outside a given *polis*, such as those who might be subjected to its military attacks (though these observations would have to be reconciled with the fact that Socrates in *Republic* 373d-e diagnoses the origins of war as lying in *pleonexia* [excessive graspingness or desire for acquisition], an important theme of the dialogue from book 1 onward, which would presumably be curbed in a just and well-ruled city).

Grubaugh asks whether this means that ‘the horizon of freedom in Plato is more limited than we would hope’, entailing that Plato’s ‘usefulness as a guide’ (strikingly, the same term that Shklar used) may likewise be curtailed. So too, Miyo Peck-Suzuki asks whether the book’s ‘project [is] to show

<sup>4</sup> Grubaugh, referring to Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 409.

<sup>5</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 317. Here is part of what I write in the book on that page: ‘The evaluative status of rule derives from both its *telos* and its *taxis*, and from the relationship between them; conversely, a complete negation of the value of either will end in undoing of the other. Thus, tyranny and anarchy respectively illustrate key axes of Plato’s understanding of rule, as well as demonstrating the inevitable intersection of those axes. Tyranny calls attention to the axis of purpose (*telos*); anarchy to the axis of order (*taxis*). In principle, *taxis*...for Plato...has prima facie value in its own right. But, if the *telos* of a *taxis* is negated and inverted, that *taxis* loses its value. Indeed, as we have just argued, in so doing it is ultimately undone as a genuine *taxis* altogether. Absolute power without any limits inevitably turns into its opposite: no actual power at all’.

<sup>6</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 35, as noted by Grubaugh.

<sup>7</sup> For ‘compossibility’, see Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 356-8 and *passim*; rule and freedom, together with friendship, are values which I note in the book are combined in the statement of the intertwined *telos* and *taxis* of rule in Plato’s *Laws*, as well as in what I call his articulation of ‘garden-variety constitutionalism’ (on which, see 367-9 and *passim*).

<sup>8</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 78 and *passim*.

<sup>9</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 182-3.

that...Plato has in fact been the authority we need for liberal constitutionalism' and implies that he cannot in fact serve as such. It is a fair and important point that Plato's political theory, as I reconstruct it, was bounded by the horizon of the Greek *polis* as being one among many others that were in practice always in the realm of potential military conflict. But how different is this from the view of the state that modern liberal political theory, including the broadly constitutionalist tradition in which I situate Plato as a precursor, also generally presupposes?

To be sure, as Constant, Hegel and others have insisted, the imperatives and conditions of citizenship in the *polis* were different from those in modern states. But the very fact of a horizon bounding one political community off from others, with potential military conflict always a concomitant threat, is in fact tacitly taken for granted in all but the most radically cosmopolitan of political theories. Once again, as in the common basic structure of an officeholding *taxis* of some kind which *Of Rule and Office* argues that ancient and modern constitutions share, the basic political contours of Greek antiquity are more consonant with those of modernity than our habitual distancing of their concerns might lead us to believe.

That said, what precisely is the nature of Plato's interest in questions of *taxis*? Peck-Suzuki proposes a distinction relevant to evaluating (the success of) my overall argument, between:

- (i) a 'strong claim' which she worries that the book does not succeed in vindicating, namely: 'that questions about accountability and institutional safeguarding are Plato's primary preoccupations and .. a fundamental contribution of his political theory is a procedural constitutionalist account of how rule can be made to serve the good of the ruled'; and
- (ii) a 'weak claim' which in her view the book 'proves...beyond doubt', namely:
 

'that Plato does...show an interest in accountability, safeguarding, and office-holding' but this is an interest which does not amount to a 'commitment...to a kind of classical constitutionalism'.<sup>10</sup>

Peck-Suzuki rightly emphasises that the origins of the decline of *kallipolis* as portrayed in *Republic* book 8 lie in a degeneration of the intellect and character of those ruling, that is, in what happens 'when the wrong people are in the wrong roles'. Here I welcome the opportunity to clarify that the book's emphasis on Plato's interest in the *taxis* of rule was never meant to exclude or minimise the importance of ensuring that the right people occupy the roles (typically including but not limited to offices) that constitute any such *taxis*.

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<sup>10</sup> Here I combine various formulations that Peck-Suzuki offers.

On the contrary, as Peck-Suzuki highlights, any *taxis* of rule will be undermined if the people occupying the *taxis* are unsuited to those roles. My point in the book is that the education of potential rulers and officeholders is education *for* their respective roles within the *taxis*, and those roles will carry with them certain kinds of limits (even if only the limits derived from the content of the appropriate *telos*) which are necessary to ensure that rule is carried out correctly rather than exploitatively.

To put this point in terms of the book's opening critique of Karl Popper's rejection of Plato, to which Peck-Suzuki alludes: it is not that Popper (or, *a fortiori*, Peck-Suzuki) was wrong in holding that Plato was concerned with the question of 'Who should rule?' Clearly, he was concerned with this question. Rather, as I put it in *Of Rule and Office*, 'Plato was far from limiting himself only to [this] question'.<sup>11</sup> In writing that Plato did not limit himself *only* to the question of who should rule, I intended to signal that Plato was not following Popper in the proposal to 'replace [that] question...by the new question: *How can we so organize political institutions that bad or incompetent rulers can be prevented from doing too much damage?*', with the emphasis put on the word *replace*.<sup>12</sup> Rather, as I welcome the opportunity to clarify in reply to Peck-Suzuki here, what I aimed in the book to show is that Plato was equally concerned with *both* of the questions framed by Popper, and with their interrelationship. The question of who should rule is not just a question of *who* should rule, but also of who should *rule*; we cannot know who should rule without considering the role of rule that they are to occupy.

Thus, I would suggest that we need further to refine the distinction that Peck-Suzuki introduces by selecting among the multiple options which she offers in presenting both the strong and the weak claims. I would reject the reading of my thesis in the terms with which Peck-Suzuki initially introduces the 'strong claim', namely, as the thesis 'that questions about accountability and institutional safeguarding are Plato's *primary* preoccupations' (emphasis added): not so, given that on my account, as noted by Grubaugh, Plato is equally concerned with the *telos* of rule as with its *taxis*. Moreover, as I argued above, Plato's concern with who fills the roles of rule is as much a concern with the *taxis* of rule as is concern with the nature of those roles itself. But while that version of the strong claim is infelicitous, I do defend a different version of the strong claim that Peck-Suzuki formulates as follows: 'that Plato wants to give an account of constitutional rule that cares about how rule is ordered – not just who is doing the ruling'. Indeed, that formulation is on my account consistent with (rather than contradictory of) Peck-Suzuki's own astute observation that part of Plato's project, for example in *Republic* 8, may be to 'giv[e] his contemporaries a warning about the dangers from which these [constitutional] safeguards ultimately cannot protect them'. I would say that Plato's concern with the *taxis* of rule need not, and in my view does not, equate to his claiming that any given *taxis* is failsafe.

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<sup>11</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 27.

<sup>12</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 27.

Peck-Suzuki further questions the political upshot of the book from another angle, namely, the methodological one with which I began in quoting Shklar: here she highlights the challenge involved in even ‘identifying ... which claims we can attribute to Plato’. Part of Peck-Suzuki’s formulation of the ‘weak claim’ is that the book might be read as claiming that that Plato uses the leading characters whom I call his ‘avatars’ simply to ‘explor[e] many potential ... commitments’, among which ‘a commitment to a kind of classical constitutionalism’ is simply one commitment being explored but not necessarily endorsed. While this is indeed a possible reading and deployment of my ‘avatars’ approach, it is not the path that the book proposes. Rather, *Of Rule and Office* proposes that ‘it is illuminating’ to construe the leading character in each of its three focal dialogues (that is, Socrates in the *Republic*, the Eleatic Visitor in the *Statesman*, and the Athenian Visitor in the *Laws*) as an ‘avatar’ of Plato, such that ‘we find as readers that it is in and through the avatars that Plato is most fully able to think through the questions to which he recurs in the context of variously revealing constraints’.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, while I do state earlier in the book (as Peck-Suzuki quotes) that ‘I unabashedly attribute views to Plato’, the views attributable in connection with each (distinct) avatar may differ, even as they can be seen overall as ‘complementary’.<sup>14</sup> I would also emphasise that the avatar approach is presented as heuristically useful (‘it is illuminating’, 74, as quoted above), not as necessary or foundational. Indeed, as I discuss at greater length in a forthcoming symposium on the book in the journal *Polis*, I see the avatar approach as having emerged from my study of the dialogues, not as having preceded or underpinned that study: it is the fruit of a kind of reflective equilibrium between method and content.

The same is true of the question of contextualism which Grubaugh raises. While I appreciate Grubaugh’s observation that I show Plato to have been ‘not a *victim* of his context’, but rather ‘capable of...seeing it for what it was, as a spectator of sorts’, I would myself take this aspect of my work not as a contrast with the so-called Cambridge School approach, as Grubaugh positions it, but rather, as an elucidation of at least some positions that can rightly lay claim to that (variegated) mantle. In other words, *Of Rule and Office* is in my view an equal fruit of what I have been privileged to learn from time spent at Cambridge and (much shorter, but nevertheless significant) time spent at Oxford. In this context I am especially delighted to be able to contribute to the launch of *Oxford New Books* by Sophie Smith, whom I am proud to count as having been at one time my Cambridge undergraduate student, and to salute the extraordinarily thoughtful and challenging commentaries on my work produced at Oxford by Connor Grubaugh and Miyo Peck-Suzuki.

<sup>13</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 74-75.

<sup>14</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, respectively at 30 (‘avatar’) and at 184-5, and *passim*.

## Contradiction and Making the World Anew

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‘THE left is trying to take grandma away, now, and confiscate the kids, and this is supposed to be progressive? What the fuck?’<sup>1</sup> Sophie Lewis is tongue-in-cheek when engaging with critics of her proposal to abolish the family. But Lewis is clear that she is not chiding us for the love of our family, if we are lucky enough to have that. The proposal to abolish the family itself presents a very real existential challenge to us and to our economic and social systems at large. Lewis’s attack is not on our need for love or care. In fact, the book should be read as advancing a case for *more* love and *more* care. She asks us to see differently the problems of the family, its institutions, history, and how we care for each other. Lewis proposes that we instead consider the following questions: what would it mean to not need the family? Could we not imagine something *better* than the family for how we organise care?

To answer these questions, Lewis thinks we must first ask about the conditions that made the nuclear family possible. In prioritising this question, she harks back to a long and sometimes ignored feminist tradition that looks to denaturalise the family and its institutions. It is a tradition that points out that many of the standard characteristics of the Western family – mum, dad, 2.5 children, a dog, and a white picket fence – are neither necessary nor inevitable. Lewis prompts us to consider the role that patriarchy, whiteness, empire, and other systems of domination have in creating and shaping this reality, our reality.

At the centre of this analysis is a story about how the family privatises care. Drawing on Kathi Weeks, Lewis argues that all families participate in this process of enclosure.<sup>2</sup> Locked away in our households, the work that reproduces the workforce, and cares for children, the sick, and the elderly is done mostly by women working for free, perhaps out of a sense of obligation or duty, or by domestic workers on desperately low pay. Lewis proposes that this is an environment in which love cannot flourish, not really. Many critics of family abolition often stumble at this first hurdle, responding ‘But, I love

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this commentary was first presented on Monday 10 October 2022 in All Souls College, Oxford at a roundtable on Sophie Lewis, *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation* (London: Verso, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Kathi Weeks, ‘Abolition of the Family: The Most Infamous Feminist Proposal’, *Feminist Theory* 24, no. 3 (2023 [online first 2021]), 433–53.

my kids!' It's not that Lewis doesn't think that you love them, or that you only visit grandma out of obligation. However, Lewis repeatedly emphasises that we should all be so lucky to feel such love. She reminds readers that the family is not always the safe haven that some assume. At the heart of Lewis' point is that during this process of enclosure, where our care work is shut away from the world and routinely undervalued and under-supported, this does not lay the ground for happiness to flourish. As Silvia Federici said of this situation, 'They said it is love, we say it is unwaged work'.<sup>3</sup>

Before I read Lewis' book, I was certainly critical of the family and its functions. I don't think, however, that I would have counted myself as a family abolitionist. It is rare to find a book that prompts the kinds of personal and in-depth discussions about family, love, and care as this one does. The success of *Abolish the Family* lies partly in its patience. It takes seriously a range of critical or hesitant responses to what Kathi Weeks has called feminism's 'most infamous proposal': the complete abolition of the family.<sup>4</sup> That is, the complete dismantling of the family as a particular sociological and economic unit – though "Abolish the family!" is certainly a catchier slogan. Surely, the sympathetic critic might say, it is not that we need to abolish the family, we need to *reform* its institutions. Should the aim not be to expand the definition, and so the boundaries, of the family, such that it might include queer families or other non-traditional family forms? Such a reader might be willing to advocate for the abolition of the nuclear, patriarchal family; but why should we target marginalised families, which might themselves be sites of resistance to the dominant nuclear paradigm?

Lewis is adept at handling these critiques as she takes readers through them step by step. Lewis notes how it is simultaneously possible to love one's Black family, even to see it as a site of safety in a world of white supremacy, and to understand that the family itself emerged because of the forms of violence involved in empire, colonialism, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy. This love might lead some to want to resist the family or it might mean we cling to it. For Lewis, 'reforming' or 'abolishing' the family isn't some sort of semantic disagreement. It is especially difficult terrain to discuss marginalised family forms, who often practice the kinds of kinship we might want more of. Lewis dwells on what we might salvage from these family forms, considering what other ways of organising kinship could emerge from them. Rather than electing to say that we need an *expanded* family form and specifying that we should abolish white, cisheterosexual, patriarchal families, Lewis clarifies what she takes abolition to mean in this context. When she calls for the abolition of all families, Lewis is calling for an end to the privatisation of care as its most fundamental feature. Though marginalised family forms may contain seeds of potential for Lewis to organise kinship in ways that are better than the family, she warns against forgetting to turn a

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<sup>3</sup> Silvia Federici, 'Wages Against Housework', in *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012), 15.

<sup>4</sup> Weeks, 'Abolition of the Family'.

critical lens to even marginalised family forms. What becomes clear is that, yes, Lewis does mean *abolition* of the family, all families.

If you read Lewi's book and you're sold on the idea of abolishing the family, then the question quickly becomes: 'How?' Abolishing the family and the necessary revolution it entails (or perhaps presupposes) is not an event anyone will be hosting next Tuesday. The answer is more complicated, and it cuts to the heart of what 'abolition' really means. For Lewis, as for other family abolitionists, to speak of abolition is not merely to call for an absence. Lewis is clear that the project is one of world-building, of institution building, which requires continuous and collective acts of creativity. Positioning the book as "critically utopian", she pushes us to reimagine social reproduction, and its organisation, from its very foundations. The family, she argues, is really what is utopian here, meant in the pejorative sense of that word. For many of us, the family can seldom live up to the myth surrounding it, and it leaves us wanting. Lewis could easily talk about the shocking domestic violence statistics and the violence that surrounds the family as an institution, which she gestures towards at points. However, even absent this, Lewis recognises that the family is often a site of discomfort and begrudging obligation. As she remarks, it is uncomfortable and often met with anger to suggest that we all deserve better than what we got growing up.

That you love your family members and yet you would also happily see the institution wither away might seem contradictory. But why are we so often allergic to seeming contradiction? Can the analysis of contradiction, as Marx showed, not be revelatory? Throughout the book, Lewis insists that the willingness to dwell in contradiction is a necessary condition for much abolitionist thought.

In their 2022 book, *Abolition. Feminism. Now.*, Angela Davis, Gina Dent, Erica Meiners and Beth Richie introduce this as 'both/and' thinking, rather than binary 'either/or' thinking.<sup>5</sup> This is to say that abolition often requires that we do multiple things at once. It is a framework that does not shy away from contradictions. As the authors argue, rather than a limitation, these contradictions themselves might be a spark for change and generate necessary sites of analysis.<sup>6</sup> How, for example, does the movement for family abolition speak to other abolitionist movements like prison abolition or those who hold post-work ambitions? Are there tensions between these visions of abolition, or are they movements with the same ends in mind?

Lewis writes that the family is a shield that many, particularly the most marginalised, took up to survive a war. She invites us to consider that the war does not have to go on forever. In putting down the shield, the steps to ending that war require us to do things that might be in tension. In the final chapter, Lewis indicates that for us this means reducing harms in the moment, such as through fighting forced family separations at the border or offering solidarity to a queer kid in that same family should she need it. But these actions are not our horizon.

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<sup>5</sup> Angela Y. Davis et al., *Abolition. Feminism. Now.* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2022), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Davis et al., *Abolition. Feminism. Now.*, 3-6.



The vision Lewis presents of abolishing the family is one that is far off. As she ends the book, she remarks that it's a future that we might not yet be able to desire fully. If the task for feminism is, as Amia Srinivasan puts it in *The Right to Sex* (2021), that we transform the world beyond recognition, this complete and utter transformation might yet seem like something we are not able to fully grasp.<sup>7</sup> It is nonetheless important to see that there is a kernel of this future to be found in our present. These kernels may be taken from art and architecture, poetry, protest camps, marginalised family forms or other 'experiments in imagining otherwise'.<sup>8</sup> Scraps of inspiration for how to build something *better* are to be found in the here and now.

How might we bridge this gap between the near and the far-off? In reflecting on this tension, I was reminded of a quote from *Abolition. Feminism. Now.* expressing the difficult task we have in remaking the world anew:

The productive tension of holding onto a radical, real and deep vision while engaging in the messy daily practice *is* the feminist praxis: the work of everyday people to try, to build, to make. And this requires collectivity. Always.<sup>9</sup>

When I first read the ending of Lewis' book, I was struck with a sense of melancholy. Perhaps it is true we cannot yet fully know what it means to desire a world without the family, where we can be together as people and we end the separation of peoples. It even feels uncomfortable to recognise the radical hope that Lewis expresses in her vision of a 'glorious and abundant nothing' that may come after the family. For many of us invested in projects of abolition, including the abolition of the family or prisons, we likely won't see or reap the benefits of our collective struggle in our lifetimes. Despite this, our work remains to do what we can to build something better for a future that will not be ours to inhabit but that we have to hope for and to do our best to imagine.

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<sup>7</sup> Amia Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), xi.

<sup>8</sup> Lola Olufemi, *Experiments in Imagining Otherwise* (Maidstone: Hajar Press, 2021).

<sup>9</sup> Davis et al, *Abolition. Feminism. Now.*, 16.

## Love's Demands

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**I**N *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation*, Sophie Lewis weaves a compelling, generative, and accessible case for family abolitionism.<sup>1</sup> In under a hundred pages, the four chapters cover vast historical and theoretical ground. They take us from an introduction to family abolitionism and the arguments behind it, to a consideration of some of its history, its most challenging questions and, finally, some reflections on the family-free futures we might work towards.

The persuasiveness of Lewis' work derives in part from its willingness to reinterpret its own genre. *Abolish the Family* is not a typical manifesto. Where we might expect unshakeable convictions and bold predictions, Lewis from the very first page grants an unusual amount of space to fear and (self-)doubt. The book opens by acknowledging family abolitionism's 'explosive emotional freight', the many anxieties the idea elicits, and Lewis even admits how 'scary (psychologically challenging)' she finds it herself.<sup>2</sup> Lewis aims neither to dispel our fears nor to distract us from them, but to convince us, in the face of them, that family abolitionism is a cause worth fighting for. The light Lewis casts is that of a warm torch held by an equally frightened but determined friend offering to accompany us from where we are to where we need to go.

The case Lewis presents for abolitionism rests in part on an analysis of what the family does. The family, Lewis argues, serves as an oppressive capitalist technology that 'incubates chauvinism and competition ... manufactures 'individuals' with a cultural, ethnic, and binary gender identity; a class; and a racial consciousness ... performs free labor for the market ... [and] functions as capitalism's base unit'.<sup>3</sup> The struggle for the abolition of the family thus becomes a fight for our liberation. Lewis is at her most absorbing and witty, however, when she builds her defence of family abolitionism on what the family fails to deliver. Here, she reminds us that the 'guaranteed belonging, trust, recognition, and fulfilment' as well as care that we often associate with the family 'remains a bit of a fiction'.<sup>4</sup> All too regularly, the family turns into a horror story, the most frequent site of rape, murder, blackmail, bullying, verbal

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this commentary was first presented on Monday 10 October 2022 in All Souls College, Oxford at a roundtable on Sophie Lewis, *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation* (London: Verso, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 10, 8.

and physical abuse. Anyone promising to treat us like family, Lewis provocatively observes, ‘ought to register as a horrible threat’.<sup>5</sup> If we truly love our family members – that is, by Lewis’ definition, ‘struggle for their autonomy as well as for their immersion in care, insofar such abundance is possible in a world choked by capital’ – we will wish more for them than the ‘organized poverty’ of care that is the family system.<sup>6</sup> We will reach instead for different relations and ways of distributing care, ‘for an abundance we have never known and have yet to organize’.<sup>7</sup> The family, Lewis says, ‘is getting in the way of alternatives’.<sup>8</sup>

Lewis’s willingness to entertain critiques and alternative views makes reading *Abolish the Family* feel like an open invitation to join the discussion. In what remains, I would like to offer some reflections in the spirit of such a conversation.

One question I have asked myself is what kind of relationship Lewis sees between the family abolitionist project and the reimagining of our romantic and sexual relationships. In *Abolish the Family*, Lewis’s claim that to love someone truly means to want more care for them than the family can offer is framed in terms of the child-parent relationship. If love implies a wish for care ‘then restricting the number of mothers (of whatever gender) to whom a child has access, on the basis that I am the ‘real’ mother, is not necessarily a love worthy of the name’.<sup>9</sup> Conversely, children who love their mothers would not wish on them the ‘oppressiveness’ and ‘loneliness’ of family-motherhood: ‘when you love someone, it simply makes no sense to endorse a social technology that isolates them, privatises their lifeworld, arbitrarily assigns their dwelling-place, class, and very identity in law, and drastically circumscribes their sphere of intimate, interdependent ties’.<sup>10</sup> That is all very true and, indeed, compelling. But why the focus on the child-parent relationship? Might we not also be drawn to abolish the family because we would like our partners to experience a richer intimate life, the possibilities of freer, more fulfilling amorous relationships than the restrictive form of the family allows? And if loving someone means to wish for them an abundance of care and autonomy, should we not also be unravelling the possessive nets of monogamy?

To think of family abolitionism and ethical non-monogamy as deeply interrelated is nothing new. We might think of Becky Chambers’s *Wayfarers* series (2014-2021) in which the lizard-like Aandrisk follow a communal childrearing scheme where ‘house families’ composed of older Aandrisk, raise the hatchlings of their younger, fertile counterparts. This gives young adult Aandrisk the freedom to travel or study, and to pursue exciting and emotionally meaningful intimate lives with other Aandrisk adults of their own choosing, their ‘feather families.’ The nuclear family is abandoned to make

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<sup>5</sup> Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 9.

<sup>6</sup> Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 2, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 2-3.

space for greater personal, emotional, romantic, and sexual fulfilment.<sup>11</sup> In Lewis' work, too, family abolitionism and polyamory (or consensual non-monogamy) often appear together. Almost all the figures, cultures, and movements Lewis cites in her potted history of family abolitionism – from 19<sup>th</sup>-century French utopian Charles Fourier through to American indigenous tribes, enslaved and emancipated African Americans, early European socialists, Karl Marx, Soviet revolutionary Alexandra Kollontai, women's liberationist Shulamith Firestone to late 20<sup>th</sup>-century gay liberationists – all advocated for and practiced non-monogamous relationships, as Lewis emphasises. How then are we to understand the relationship between family abolitionism and the reinvention of our intimate relationships? And why not frame the family abolitionist project in part as driven by the search for more satisfying amorous relationships?

The second thread I wish to explore concerns a particular alternative to the family that is not foregrounded by Lewis but that, as a queer historian, I cannot help but examine: community. Having earlier considered a wealth of historical and contemporary traditions of organising social life beyond the nuclear family, Lewis in the final chapter once more asks her readers to explore different ways of standing in relationship to each other. 'It's time to practice being kith<sup>12</sup> or, better, comrades – including toward members of our 'biofam' – building structures of dependency, need and provision with no kinship dimension'.<sup>13</sup> I wonder whether 'community' might feature on this list of alternative structures and relationships.

Two considerations motivate my question. First, community's historical legacy. Community has long been the practical answer some groups, especially LGBT+ people, have given to their own family horror stories. When U.S. homophile activists in 1960s San Francisco first began deploying ideas of community, it was in part because they hoped that community might provide the care they were being denied by their families. Homophile activist Guy Strait understood 'community' as a collective that would 'look after our own,' and urged his fellow activists to launch 'a great program of mutual assistance' that included a blood and clothing bank.<sup>14</sup> Mark Forrester, another homophile activist, envisioned that the first gay community centre founded in 1966 San Francisco would act as a halfway house 'for the so-called 'rejects' of society, the unloved, the unwanted, those who do not seem to fit into society's general idea of a productive citizenship'.<sup>15</sup> Forrester explicitly included young gays who had been disowned by their families. And James 'Robbie' Robinson, a gay bartender who had been abused as a child by his father describes how

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<sup>11</sup> Aandrisk society is discussed at greatest length in Becky Chambers, *The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2014), 249-78.

<sup>12</sup> Lewis suggests the Old English 'kith,' 'a form of dynamic relation between beings, a bond similar to 'kin,' but one whose ground is knowledge, practice, and place' as a helpful intermediary and bridge out of the familiar kin into the unfamiliar post-family society. Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 85.

<sup>13</sup> Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 86.

<sup>14</sup> [Guy Strait], 'The Community', *L.C.E. News* 1, No. 25 (17 Sept. 1962).

<sup>15</sup> Mark Forrester, 'A Halfway House,' undated, *Don Lucas Papers*, Box 11, Folder 4, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

discovering the idea of a community meant that ‘We were a ‘family’ and could speak about our needs and demand that they be recognized.’<sup>16</sup> While some of these activists conceived of community rather narrowly as a gay community that only included homosexuals, others imagined community more broadly as a collective that would include and nurture a great variety of different groups.<sup>17</sup> The inventors of ‘gay community’ were themselves following in the footsteps of earlier traditions. Most notably, they were able to draw on ideas circulating in the Civil Rights movement, particularly Martin Luther King’s ideas of ‘beloved community’, as models for reimagining care and interdependence.<sup>18</sup> Feminist thinkers like Chela Sandoval, Judith Butler, and Audre Lorde have likewise all expressed their desire for new, inclusive visions and instantiations of community.<sup>19</sup>

The second reason ‘community’ strikes me as a possible paradigm for post-familial relations and webs of care lies in its continued popularity with grassroots movements. ‘Community’ has found widespread appeal since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. Self-styled community groups have sprung up all around the country to provide the solidarity and support neither the state nor the family could reliably provide. In my hometown of Oxford, ‘community’ was most prominently taken up by Oxford Community Action (OCA). OCA is a community-led group composed mostly of multi-ethnic BAME working-class and immigrant activists who provide food, childcare services, and many other services to many different local communities, including some of the most marginalised groups in Oxford. The way many people practice ‘comradeliness’ today, for better or for worse, is not as self-proclaimed communists but as proud ‘community members’.

Let me close with a reflection on the proximity of family abolition. Lewis’ book ends on a pessimistic note, with her belief that she is unlikely to witness the abolition of the family in her lifetime.<sup>20</sup> Across the book, she gives reasons for this conclusion: the failure of varied and powerful movements and activist-thinkers to abolish the family; the absence of family abolitionism in contemporary liberal politics. ‘To attack the family is as unthinkable in liberal-democratic politics as it has ever been’, Lewis laments.<sup>21</sup> And yet, Lewis’s wide-ranging historical survey contains grounds for optimism, too. Family abolition might have failed to achieve widespread uptake, but it is an idea that never

<sup>16</sup> James ‘Robbie’ Robinson, *My Story, One Gay’s Fight: From Hate to Acceptance*, (GLC 197), James C. Hormel LGBTQIA Center, San Francisco Public Library, [2017], 75.

<sup>17</sup> Mori Reithmayr, ‘The Invention of Gay Community in San Francisco, 1953-1969,’ [unpublished MS].

<sup>18</sup> On Martin Luther King’s idea of ‘beloved community,’ see for example Michele Moody-Adams, ‘The Path of Conscientious Citizenship,’ in Tommie Shelby and Brandon M. Terry (eds), *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 269-89, 270-5.

<sup>19</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 118-19; Kai Cheng Thom, *I Hope We Choose Love: A Trans Girl’s Notes from the End of the World* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2019), 9; Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007 [1984]), 112; Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 69.

<sup>20</sup> Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 88.

<sup>21</sup> Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 7.

gone away, despite powerful opposition. Taking seriously Lewis's appeal to think about what our love for one another should entail can amplify this optimism. Our desire to see our loved ones enjoy an abundance of care and freedom can push both self-identified and reluctant family abolitionists to reorient themselves and reach beyond insufficient familial patterns of care. And the 'everyday utopian experiments' such love can inspire 'do generate strands of an altogether different social tissue: microcultures which could be scaled up if the movement for a classless society took seriously the premise that households can be formed freely and run democratically', as Lewis herself emphasises.<sup>22</sup> After putting down *Abolish the Family*, the family's abolition can seem both near and far.

Perhaps, then, those of us convinced of the importance of the cause need to develop a kind of double vision. As Ursula Le Guin, an author Lewis often takes as an interlocutor, once suggested, 'if you look at us at certain odd times of day in certain weathers' we are as androgynous as the inhabitants of some of her own fictional worlds. How might we today, in the light of our reality, already be family abolitionists at certain odd times of day here on Earth, whether we realise it or not?<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 6.

<sup>23</sup> Ursula Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, (New York: Ace Books, 1976), ix.

## Author's Response

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THE theory and praxis of family abolitionism is in good hands with Mori Reithmayer and Kushti Westwood, both of whom approach the method of critical utopia, the dialectical structure of abolition (qua *Aufhebung* of the present state of things), and the trouble of communization's partial unknowability with striking thoughtfulness and skill. Both critics prioritise the task of connecting the problematic of *Abolish the Family* with the evolving abolition struggles of the present – struggles around police, prisons, and child protective services – from which family abolition must never be parted (and can never be parted, without betraying itself). As Westwood rightly frames it, the project of care communization, no more nor less than these other active struggles, is a 'world-building' one, 'which requires continuous and collective acts of creativity.' Between them, these two very generous commentaries also illuminate (for me) much fresh terrain. I've quite obviously been spoiled here, in the sense that it is a rare treat to receive critical attention from fellow travellers as radically engaged and thoughtful as these. To see my pamphlet described as 'a warm torch' held out by an 'equally frightened but determined friend,' as Reithmayer puts it, makes me suddenly conscious that there's something in my eye. By the same token, it touches me greatly that Westwood now counts herself something of a family abolitionist, when she did not self-describe that way before.

For Reithmayer, quoting Ursula Le Guin to great effect, the actualization of family abolition can already be perceived slantwise in the present, 'at certain odd times of day in certain weathers'. I am in complete agreement, and these odd times of day are perhaps, indeed, the moments when speculative fabulations or science fictions tell the truth more accurately than any putative 'realism.' Sometimes all it takes to glimpse the post-scarcity future is a rereading of 'now', a denaturalising gesture. After all, as one UK-based research collective noted in its own review, for a Science Fiction 'creator, to abolish a so-called law of nature is not a ridiculous proposition which can be used to embarrass utopians into giving up on their belief that 'things could be different'.<sup>1</sup> As Reithmayer aptly suggests, it is the immanence of an anti-proprietary love or (following Alexandra Kollontai) *red love* in the present, that gives the lie to the 'law of nature' currently defining love as possession. In other words, it is oftentimes our very family members who inspire our family abolitionism, for instance when it is 'our desire to see our loved ones enjoy an

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<sup>1</sup> Beyond Gender, 'Abolish the Family' by Sophie Lewis', *Vector* 8 June, 2023: <https://vector-bsfa.com/2023/06/08/abolish-the-family>.

abundance of care and freedom' that fuels our zeal to disestablish private nuclear householding.

This insight is borne out beautifully in a new oral history of the near future, *Everything For Everyone* (2022), in which the U.S.-based sociologists Eman Abdelhadi and M.E. O'Brien interview a range of individuals about the fall of capitalism, the task of ecological restoration, the communising of care (abolition of the family), and the final victory of the Palestinian intifada, among other topics. Subtitled *An Oral History of the New York Commune, 2052-2072*, the book in question is a novel – a work of Science Fiction – albeit one presenting itself as an anthology of interviews conducted by real women: older version of the authors themselves. Perhaps *Everything for Everyone* is really non-fiction, masquerading as a fiction? Either way, one of the people from the future is a New Yorker called Latif Timbers, interviewed by Abdelhadi in the year 2069. In a chapter on 'Gestation Work' Timbers recounts how the upheaval of the revolution that began in 2052 separated them from their family of origin and tipped them into a situation where, initially, many children were surviving together in the ruins of New York City in a big group. At the time of the interview, however, little Latif has grown up. Following several years spent in a massive childcare crèche called 'AfroCarr' (founded by adult militants) they and the others chose to re-form their autonomous group from before the revolution. 'Familiyng,' here, is a verb.

In this future, older people have not all dropped every shred of family ideology overnight. There are 'conferences and citywide meetings' which routinely address the question of 'how to shift people's focus away from the bio of it all,' as Timbers stresses. 'But honestly, the very structure of the commune has already done that'.<sup>2</sup> Communes come in different sizes; Latif's is mid-sized. Semi-autonomously, then, the teenaged survivors *familied* together again, and set up a group house separate from AfroCarr, making plans, in Latif's case, to receive a uterus transplant in the hopes of realising a powerful desire to make new life. But, unfortunately, Latif's body turned out to be medically unsuitable for transplantation on account of the various physical traumas they'd incurred after living on the street for so long. Finally, now, somewhat adjusted to this grievous disappointment, Latif works as a 'gestation care coordinator' at a Gestation Center, meaning they're the 'point person' for an extensive care-team charged with supporting anyone, male or female, doing pregnancy labour.

Most people can gestate now, if they want to, Latif explains. About half the people who perform gestation choose to do so at home in their big households – and 'care structures vary a lot between communes' – while the other half opt for the immersive care of a Gestation Center, with counsellors, doctors, therapies, and even self-organised theatres. Either way, 'DNA doesn't give anyone ownership of children,' Latif emphasises. 'Children are children, they're precious and beautiful and it doesn't really matter who made them or how.' Such an immanent logic of 'full surrogacy' (as I put it elsewhere) will necessarily snag and roil painfully, even as it spreads, against the ghostly reproductive stratifications of the past – what Westwood calls 'the role that

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<sup>2</sup> Eman Abdelhadi and M. E. O'Brien, *Everything for Everyone: An Oral History of the New York Commune: 2052-2072* (Philadelphia: Common Notions, 2022), 187.



patriarchy, whiteness, empire, and other systems of domination have in creating and shaping this reality, our reality'.<sup>3</sup> But in the context of an evolving overhaul of social relations as a whole – including the decommodification of food, shelter, and medicine, thoroughgoing decarceration, and the reversal of the once-regnant priority of accumulation over life—an idealistic-sounding principle can, in fact, become hyperstitional, not just aspirational.

Westwood wisely wonders 'how ... does the movement for family abolition speak to other abolitionist movements like prison abolition or those who hold post-work ambitions?' *Everything for Everyone*, I think, shows us how, as does the authors' follow-up epistolary short story, *Sharaner Maash* (2023).<sup>4</sup> There Latif reveals that they have moved on from gestation support to become a death doula or hospice worker, alongside running a 'memorial park' with holograms of people from the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. These holograms are used to explain to people in the year 2086 'the basic concepts of poverty and houselessness' and that justice, 'back then,' meant putting people in cages. According to Latif's friend Kayla – who is talking, essentially, about you and me – 'Living under the rule of money was already death; they were never alive in the first place.'

In a different genre, Katie Gibson, an anthropologist and self-described 'former ward of the state of New York,' likewise knits together the struggles against the private nuclear household and the racial capitalist state. Gibson's essay 'Bringing Abolition Home: Why Family Abolition Needs to be at the Heart of the Movement to Abolish Family Policing,' notes that the U.S. system known as 'family policing' comprises 'child welfare systems, work-first welfare policies, welfare retrenchment, and carceral expansion,' all of which 'have worked in tandem to systematically surveil, criminalize, displace, and traumatize generations of Black mothers and their children'.<sup>5</sup> And yet, insists Gibson, a revolutionary movement in the U.S. cannot simply stop at defending the criminalised family against policing or vindicating the black family against the state's destruction of familial bonds. No, it is just as important to be 'advocating for laws that recognize children's rights and human rights *beyond* the family.' Yet many activists for the abolition of the family policing are silent with regard to foster care survivors and runaways who keep running and don't look back, i.e., who don't return to their families of origin. If the movements on Turtle Island are to be truly abolitionist, Gibson suggests, they must resist the romanticization of motherhood (including black motherhood) and rise to the task of treating 'the family as an invention of the capitalist state rather than its precursor or alternative.' One place to start would be: replacing custody laws with children's rights, beginning with a right to safe and consistent shelter and a basic income. (Reithmayer and Westwood can no doubt – will, I hope – educate their North American family-abolitionist peers on the analogous struggles for children's rights in Britain.)

<sup>3</sup> Sophie Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family* (New York: Verso, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Eman Abdelhadi and M.E. O'Brien, 'Sharaner Maash, or a haunting from the time before', *e-flux*, May, 2023: [e-flux.com/architecture/tomorrows-myths/532327/sharaner-maash](https://e-flux.com/architecture/tomorrows-myths/532327/sharaner-maash).

<sup>5</sup> Katie Gibson, 'Bringing Abolition Home: Why Family Abolition Needs to be at the Heart of the Movement to Abolish Family Policing', *Blind Field: A Journal of Cultural Inquiry*, 6 June, 2023: [blindfieldjournal.com/2023/06/06/bringing-abolition-home](https://blindfieldjournal.com/2023/06/06/bringing-abolition-home).

The child qua proto-property under capitalism, struggling for liberation, may be central to family abolition, but ‘what about our partners,’ asks Reithmayer? ‘Why not frame the family abolitionist project in part as driven by the search for more satisfying amorous relationships?’ Reithmayer, here, raises questions about the abolitionist transformation of sexual and romantic intimacies that my pamphlet somewhat deprioritises (however unintentionally). They also gently interrogate *Abolish the Family*’s neglect of the category of ‘community,’ noting this terminology’s ‘continued popularity with grassroots movements’ and pointing to the homophile movement’s – sometimes radical – anti-bourgeois practices of ‘gay community’. In this way Reithmayer adds further historical backing to M.E. O’Brien’s communist vindication of Martin Luther King’s horizon of ‘beloved community’.<sup>6</sup>

Reithmayer is perceptive to pinpoint a certain reticence on my part on the question of romantic love and the couple-form. To be sure, as a married queer person I have stated unequivocally where I stand on the question of marriage: ‘LGBTQ discourse used to position marriage as irredeemable, a form of “property love.” In 2015, our inclusion into it didn’t just give the sagging institution a new lease of life. It demoralised and defanged the queer movement’.<sup>7</sup> I have always been open and vocal about my green-card marriage, but nonetheless, trans-exclusionary radical feminists are extremely fond of tweeting cruelly about it as though it were a supreme ‘gotcha.’ Whatever the reason (and perhaps it is cowardice, or, more sympathetically, protectiveness of my transsexual wife and publicity-shy boyfriend) I have avoided centring conjugal questions in my public speaking and writing about the communisation of care. I do not consider my domestic practices *radical*, nor do I wish to excuse or justify myself for falling short of anti-mononormative praxis, but I speculate that part of the explanation for my (non-)focus is the context of a social-democratic left rife with queerphobic and conservative tendencies to mock ‘polyamory’ and ‘ethical nonmonogamy’ as an ‘elite fad,’ a response I find alarming, not to mention personally hurtful. Simultaneously, I share some of antiwork philosopher Kathi Weeks’s concerns about ‘the limits of the alternative’: to wit, ‘some forms of polyamory not only repeat but deepen the individualism that remains at the heart of the couple form’.<sup>8</sup> Yet, along with Reithmayer, Weeks, and myriad utopianists past and present, I want to reaffirm, here, that I consider myself wholeheartedly committed to the decolonization of love, and to the destruction of private property along with the possessive settler sexuality that flows from it.

When it comes to ‘community,’ I take Reithmayer’s points and humbly accede, therefore, to the inclusion of this term in the proliferation of possibilities for actualising ‘red love.’ I would gesture, in so doing, towards all the usual caveats—classically, those itemised by Miranda Joseph in her book about neoliberalism and the non-profit industrial complex, *Against the Romance*

<sup>6</sup> M.E. O’Brien, *Family Abolition: Capitalism and the Communizing of Care* (London: Pluto, 2023).

<sup>7</sup> Sophie Lewis, ‘A Marriage Abolitionist Says “I... Do?”’, *Red Pepper*, 19 November, 2023: [redpepper.org.uk/society/lgbtqplus/a-marriage-abolitionist-says-i-do](https://redpepper.org.uk/society/lgbtqplus/a-marriage-abolitionist-says-i-do).

<sup>8</sup> Kathi Weeks, ‘Abolition of the family: the most infamous feminist proposal’, *Feminist Theory* 24, no. 3 (2023): 433–453, at 445.

of *Community* (2002). In addition, following M.E. O'Brien (who sees the risks attendant on what we might perhaps call 'strategic communitarianism'), I am inclined to think of real community as a prospect 'beyond the end of the world.' This brings me, finally, to Westwood's wrestling with the melancholic inevitability of 'building something better for a future that is not ours.' My response to this sadness is deeply and fundamentally sympathetic. I will remember how discomfited I felt the first time I heard Kathi Weeks put the point: 'The future is not for us'.<sup>9</sup> Rather than offer false comfort, I will end by with the poet and comrade Diane di Prima's 'Revolutionary Letter #2'. There she affirmed that 'we are endless as the sea, not separate' making false the idea that 'you only live once' ('a credo they taught us / to instill fear, and inaction'). 'Get up,' she wrote, 'put on your shoes, get / started, someone will finish'.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Johanna Isaacson, 'Defamiliarizing Family', *Blind Field: A Journal of Cultural Inquiry*, 25 August (2022): [blindfieldjournal.com/2022/08/24/defamiliarizing-family](https://blindfieldjournal.com/2022/08/24/defamiliarizing-family).

<sup>10</sup> Diane Di Prima, *Revolutionary Letters: 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*, (London: Silver Press, 2021), 216.

## Political Money from Locke to Kwasi Kwarteng

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STEFAN Eich's *Currency of Politics* is bold and wide-ranging, yet also precise and carefully argued.<sup>1</sup> It offers insightful analysis of figures ranging from Aristotle to John Maynard Keynes. For readers with an interest in the history of early modern political thought, the book's second chapter, on John Locke and the English monetary crisis of the 1690s, deserves a review in its own right. Here, Eich offers a new perspective on a period of financial and political innovation which has long held a central place in the efforts by historians of political thought to trace the emergence of 'modern' politics and commercial society. In particular, Eich's chapter chimes with – and raises questions about – the narratives put forward by two major historians of political and commercial ideas, J.G.A. Pocock and István Hont. Since publication, it has also taken on an unforeseen topical relevance, thanks to the sudden political rise and fall of Eich's fellow scholar of the recoinage of 1695–97: one Kwasi Kwarteng, MP.

Eich's chapter contributes to a long tradition of giving the 1690s a prominent place within the history of political thought. This was the decade which saw the political workings out of the so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688, once seen as a founding moment of British liberal democracy. Though the Whig interpretation of 1688 has long been abandoned, the 1690s have retained their importance as a crucial period of transition. They are now often regarded as moment of Financial Revolution, with the foundation of the Bank of England in 1694 taken to have inaugurated a new age of credit-based finance. For J.G.A. Pocock, this period of intellectual clash between classical republicans and theorists of commercial society reshaped political debate, as modern understandings of political virtue challenged ancient ones.<sup>2</sup> For István Hont, this was the opening phase of a new effort to historicise human development, in which commercial society was recognised as a new stage of civilisation with its own distinctive challenges, and from which there was no turning back.<sup>3</sup> Pocock's *Virtue, Commerce and History* (1985) and Hont's *Jealousy of Trade* (2005) remain foundational accounts of the transition from early modern to modern politics and commercial society.

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this commentary was first presented on 20 February 2023 in New College College, Oxford at a roundtable on Stefan Eich, *The Currency of Politics: The Political Theory of Money from Aristotle to Keynes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> See especially J.G.A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> István Hont, *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation-State in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

Crucially, these are not narratives which place much stock on John Locke. Peter Laslett's pioneering re-dating of Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* had already undermined Locke's significance as the major political theorist of the 1688 revolution, and the shift to focus on the Financial Revolution of the 1690s did not lead to any recentring of Locke's ideas. Instead, as Pocock put it, Locke suffered 'a double displacement'. For though Locke was 'a theorist of recoinage and an early investor in the Bank of England', he did not become one of the vocal 'defenders of the Financial Revolution'. According to Pocock this was because the financial revolution 'was attacked in the name of [ancient republican] values to which' Locke was 'utterly indifferent'. Locke could not, therefore, be the man to 'supply the language in which this attack was answered'.<sup>4</sup>

This is where Stefan Eich's *The Currency of Politics* makes a striking intervention, placing Locke back at the heart of events. On Eich's account, what made the 1690s such a crucial moment was not the political-constitutional upheaval that followed 1688, nor specifically the foundation of the Bank of England. Instead, Eich emphasises the economic and monetary crisis that accompanied William III's war against Catholic, absolutist France, which put strain on the already depleted monetary supply in England, encouraging rampant coin clipping and a collapse in trust in the currency.<sup>5</sup>

The spiralling inflation and debasement of the coinage that ensued demanded a drastic response. John Locke was among those who vied with his contemporaries to offer a solution. Most of those consulted (an illustrious list including Isaac Newton, Christopher Wren and Charles Davenant) advocated devaluation to reset the value of existing coins to match their now reduced metal content. Locke, however, successfully advocated for a more radical solution: a full recoinage to re-establish the link between coins and their original metallic content. This move effectively laid the foundations of the gold standard, which would dominate British monetary policy until its final abolition in 1931.

As Eich notes, this was an ingenious and, after an initial wave of economic upheaval, broadly successful solution.<sup>6</sup> But it also makes Locke something of the villain of Eich's book. Locke is the man who oversaw an apparent depoliticisation – which was really, in Eich's terms, a *de-democratisation* – of money. This helped obscure money's true political nature for centuries after. Importantly, Eich emphasises that Locke himself advocated a *knowing* de-democratisation of money. But his later acolytes lost sight of this nuance and started to believe that money really was apolitical – an error with consequences up to the present day.

This is a powerful contribution to our understanding of Locke's political thought, giving Locke's often overlooked monetary writings the prominence they deserve. It also raises questions which are left unexplored in Eich's book. In particular, it would be interesting to hear more about the relationship

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<sup>4</sup> J.G.A. Pocock, 'The Machiavellian Moment Revisited: A Study in History and Ideology', *The Journal of Modern History* 53, no. 1 (1981): 49-72, at p. 65.

<sup>5</sup> See also Brodie Waddell, 'The Economic Crisis of the 1690s in England', *The Historical Journal* 66, no. 2 (2023): 281-302.

<sup>6</sup> For the disruption, see Waddell, 'The Economic Crisis', 291-294.

between what Eich calls ‘the democratisation of money’, and the republican currents of the 1690s. As Pocock notes, Aristotle – whom Eich sees as the pivotal figure in recognising money’s democratic value – provided important inspiration to the critics of credit-based finance.<sup>7</sup> Such critics emphasised the political value of participation: the Aristotelian need to ‘rule and be ruled’. Set in the context of the debate over ancient versus modern liberty, there is there a danger that, in the end, calls for a new democratisation of money cannot go far beyond a call to turn back the clock to a simpler time of ancient virtue. On Hont’s account, this is a claim which is no longer feasible in the interconnected modern world and constitutes the ultimate gulf between pre-modern and modern political thought.<sup>8</sup>

In Eich’s suggestive but brief conclusion, it remains unclear what *type* of democratisation of money he is proposing, and how far his critique of monetary policy can be differentiated from the classical republican critique of finance. Does Eich see himself as in any way an heir to such critics, or does he see himself as doing something very different? How can we today conceptualise a new democratisation of money without running into the same problems of feasibility faced by eighteenth-century advocates of ancient virtue?

The question of feasibility brings us back to the erstwhile UK Chancellor, Kwasi Kwarteng. By strange coincidence, the ‘Political Thought of the Recoinage Crisis of 1695-7’ was the subject of Kwarteng’s Cambridge PhD, supervised by István Hont. It might have been hoped that Kwarteng’s acquaintance with a previous decade of British constitutional upheaval, European war, food shortages and rapid inflation would prove good preparation for government in the early 2020s, the age of Brexit and the Russo-Ukrainian War. In many ways, his short stint in government in September 2022 *did* reflect a recognition that money is always political, just as a good student of the monetary crisis of the 1690s should. But Kwarteng’s attempt to wrest political control from the markets soon crashed to earth. I would be interested to hear Eich’s view of the role of the international markets in swiftly dispatching Kwarteng and his plans. It is tempting to see Kwarteng’s failure as fundamentally undermining future movements for the democratisation of money, whether on the left or the right.

Kwarteng has not proven an excellent advert for Cambridge School history of political thought as an education for government (finally, Cambridge enjoys some share of the ignominy of Oxford PPE). Perhaps the stand-out lesson of his term of office is that his supervisor István Hont was right: international markets place limitations on politics that are here to stay. For all Eich’s careful analysis and bold ambitions, it is not clear how a ‘democratisation of money’ can work in the modern world. Does Eich want

<sup>7</sup> J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), esp. Chs 13–14.

<sup>8</sup> For Hont’s characterisation of the modern political predicament, see Paul Sagar, ‘István Hont and Political Theory’, *European Journal of Political Theory* 17, no. 4 (2018): 476–500, esp. pp. 484–94; for an illuminating comparison of Pocock and Hont’s stances, see Lasse S. Andersen and Richard Whatmore, ‘Liberalism and republicanism, or wealth and virtue revisited’, *Intellectual History Review* 33, no. 1 (2023): 131–160.

us to draw a Pocockian lesson too: that the best – albeit unsatisfactory – response to the vagaries of the markets is to continue to battle for control as best we can, or, to put it in Machiavellian terms, to cultivate *virtù*? I am intrigued to hear more about how this would work in practice.

## Of Silver and Constitutions

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‘No state shall enter into any Treaty, Alliance, or Confederation; grant Letters of Marque and Reprisal; coin Money; emit Bills of Credit; make any Thing but gold and silver Coin a Tender in Payment of Debts...’

Art. 1, Sec 10, *The Constitution of the United States*<sup>1</sup>

STEFAN Eich’s *The Currency of Politics* is a very welcome and timely addition to the philosophical literature examining the role that money plays in political societies and the role that our thinking about money has played in shaping the political possibilities we theorise. Eich’s text is impressive in its command of a variety of technical literatures in history, politics, and economics, but beyond that also for the skill and sympathy with which it tells its stories. Seldom have debates about monetary theory been made so accessible and compelling. One of the most intellectually exciting aspects of the book is the manner in which certain figures and episodes from history, which we may imagine are familiar to us, emerge layer by layer from the book’s excavations to be not quite who and what we had thought them to be. In this brief commentary, my aim is to pick out just a couple of the threads in the text that may be of particular interest (and use) for people who want to think about the role the theory of money and monetary policy should play in contemporary political philosophy.

Money is not simply a commodity like grain or coal. Instead, it’s a special kind of promise. When you accept money from me, you’re trusting my assurance that, tomorrow, some stranger will accept the money in turn and will give you something you value in exchange for it. Once we understand money as involving promises, trust, and assurance, we are very quickly led to thinking about the connection between money and the state. The state is perhaps not the *only* entity or institution capable of providing assurance in non-intimate contexts, but it is clearly among the most prominent and effective.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this commentary was first presented on 20 February 2023 in New College College, Oxford at a roundtable on Stefan Eich, *The Currency of Politics: The Political Theory of Money from Aristotle to Keynes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022). See *The Constitution of the United States: A Transcription*, National Archives; <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript> (accessed 15 April 2024).

<sup>2</sup> The theory of money sketched here is generally described as a *credit* theory, in contrast to a *commodity* theory. Although he initially introduces varieties of each of these theories as ‘just so’ stories (*The Currency of Politics*, 4-5), throughout the text Eich more or less consistently



The relationship between the state and money has a number of important implications, and while these are present to some degree in all chapters of the book, they come through most clearly in the discussions of Locke and Fichte, and in the context of worries about international trade.<sup>3</sup> When trading partners don't share the same coercive authority which can adjudicate their disputes, they need assurance, or at least often *seek* assurance, from long-standing conventions, such as those that imbue metals like gold and silver with trust.

It is by now a commonplace to observe that contemporary political theory – at least, or perhaps especially, theory of an analytical bent – has been disproportionately written from certain perspectives. These dominant perspectives have been unrepresentative in all kinds of ways, but I want to draw attention to the fact that they have been disproportionately the view from the United States. Much political theory done in and focussed (even if only implicitly) on the United States is of course excellent, but in some areas – freedom of expression, the relationship between church and state, and racial politics, to mention a few – the US experience may be less representative than in others. Generalising from that experience without sufficient care could obviously lead us astray.

In particular, when thinking about the state, money, and politics, there are some important respects in which the United States is not representative of states generally. Let me mention just two. First, it matters whether, in theorising about the state, one assumes a small, open, trading economy – an Ireland, Israel, New Zealand, say – or a political community with a continental economic hinterland. Second, it matters whether one's state is in control of the world's *de facto* reserve currency. Rawls, writing about a closed society, which one enters by birth and leaves by death, could afford to simplify in this way – he was essentially (if inadvertently) reinventing Fichte's closed commercial state.<sup>4</sup> But when thinking about states generally – and this would seem to be true even in the context of ideal theory – the fiscal and monetary constraints imposed on states by the need to retain the confidence of their trading partners is a function of how dependent on trade we take them to be. As Eich explains in discussing Fichte, for most states, the price of real monetary autonomy would appear to be commercial autarky.<sup>5</sup> However feasible this may have been in eighteenth-century Prussia, we may think it is not a viable option today.<sup>6</sup>

Given how often analytical political philosophy has been accused of privileging a limited perspective over the past fifty years, one of the strengths of Eich's book is that he treats this observation as a starting point rather than as a conclusion. He is careful to explain the manner in which taking up different perspectives matters theoretically. His engagement with key authors who have thought about the political theory of money gives us the tools to articulate some of the external constraints produced by dependence on international trade in a context of inter-state anarchy, and to set those

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endorses a credit theory, if not necessarily the chartalist version of a credit theory which he sketches in his introduction (*The Currency of Politics*, 6).

<sup>3</sup> Among other places, see Eich, *The Currency of Politics*, 29, 44, 52, 54, 58, 59, 80, 85, 94-97.

<sup>4</sup> Eich, *The Currency of Politics*, 97-101.

<sup>5</sup> Eich, *The Currency of Politics*, 94-95, 97; see also 54, 58.

<sup>6</sup> However, compare Eich, *The Currency of Politics*, 160-162.

constraints in historical context.

These constraints also have implications for the prospect of democratising the governance of money, a theme which runs through the book but which Eich picks up most explicitly in its final sections.<sup>7</sup> Quite apart from the project of democratising the governance of money at the domestic level, the institutional prospects of democratic institutions at the international level seem dim.<sup>8</sup> To the extent that the policy autonomy of smaller, open, trade-reliant states is constrained by the need to retain the confidence of their trading partners, democratising their domestic monetary governance might have limited impact. Thus, with the possible exception of economic areas on the scale of the United States, the inability to democratise international monetary governance might fatally undermine efforts to democratise domestic monetary governance. If we please, we can put democratic institutions in place domestically; but these institutions will often be effectively impotent in the face of global markets.

Even if this is true, though, I think Eich's main conclusion can still stand. It will be valuable for citizens of all kinds of states to understand that they are making a political choice in how they respond to external constraints, a choice which is appropriately subject to democratic scrutiny and not simply the mechanical playing out of natural laws.

LET me turn now to look more closely at that domestic democratisation project. A second thread I want to pick up from Eich's book emerges most explicitly in the chapter on Keynes.<sup>9</sup> We have to start, however, with what we can call Locke's problem.<sup>10</sup>

Locke's problem is this: If sovereigns – democratic or otherwise – have discretionary control over the value of money, how can they be trusted to refrain from debasements of the currency? Debasement, whether through intentional and formal devaluation (“public clipping”<sup>11</sup>) or via more chaotic means, is objectionable on two grounds. First, it betrays the faith of creditors (not all of whom are moustache-twirling bankers and speculators).<sup>12</sup> Second, debasement of the currency often produces economic instability, most obviously in the form of uncontrollable inflation.<sup>13</sup>

Locke's solution to the problem is to take something conventional – money – and to ‘naturalise’ it; to give it the appearance of having a value determined by nature. Hence, the linking of money to fixed quantities of gold

<sup>7</sup> Eich, *The Currency of Politics*, 211-220, but also 16-17, 18 fn. 79, 51-52 (and particularly fn. 27), 75, 78, 100-101, 142-143.

<sup>8</sup> A worry of which Eich is not, of course, unaware. See Eich, *The Currency of Politics*, 171-172, 174-176, 212-213.

<sup>9</sup> For instance, Eich, *The Currency of Politics*, 169.

<sup>10</sup> Eich, *The Currency of Politics*, 52-53, 67-70, 100.

<sup>11</sup> Eich, *The Currency of Politics*, 56.

<sup>12</sup> See the nuanced and persuasive discussion of trust in Locke's theory of money (and of politics more generally), Eich, *The Currency of Politics*, 63-72.

<sup>13</sup> Though, as Eich notes, commitments to ‘sound money’ of the kind Locke (and later Lockean) endorsed can be profoundly destabilising in their own right, insofar as they can produce devastating deflationary conditions. Eich, *The Currency of Politics*, 68-70, 103, 145.

and silver, initially arbitrary but representing a sovereign promise. Eich does a superb job of tracing the development of this ‘de-politicisation’ project through modern history, noting that, as we approach our own time, de-politicisation becomes an exercise in de-democratisation – the substitution of technocratic (if no less political) governance for democratic control of money.

The Keynesian solution to Locke’s problem attempts to thread a path between the extremes of metallism – fixing the value of money to some natural quantity and therefore surrendering all control over it – and some purely discretionary fiat currency, with all of the short-termism and instability Lockeanes have feared.<sup>14</sup> The idea is that the governance of money can be insulated from the vicissitudes of ordinary politics without relinquishing – and certainly without claiming to relinquish – any kind of political control over it, or any kind of responsibility for the consequences of governing it one way or another. In different times and places, this approach has been taken with a variety of political questions. They have been constitutionalised.

This is a compelling idea. It wouldn’t exclude the possibility of independent central banks – for a given value of ‘independent’ – but it would make clear that the operation of those banks is ultimately answerable to democratic authority.<sup>15</sup> Here, I just want to invite some further reflection on the range of options we could be considering.

‘Constitutionalisation’ has different implications depending on which constitutions we have in mind. At one end of the scale, consider the Basic Law of Germany, which purports to make Articles 1-20 of the constitution unamendable – to put them permanently and irrevocably beyond political control. Consider too the onerous amendment provisions for the US constitution. In both cases, we might note the widespread reverence enjoyed by these constitutional elements. This kind of constitutionalisation – where laws governing access to military-grade weaponry, for instance, are assessed on the basis of whether some eighteenth-century constitutional founders would have approved of them – is hard to separate from the naturalisation project pursued by Locke and those who have followed him.

Moreover, in constitutional systems with such heavily entrenched provisions, we observe a lot of displacement activity. Questions which would otherwise be resolved through legislative bargaining are pushed into the courts. This tends to shape (and perhaps to distort) the manner in which the questions are articulated and navigated. We tend to see appeals to rights and to timeless moral absolutes, in contrast with appeals to interests and to temporary, revisable settlements. The perceived role of courts also changes, with judges increasingly understood as partisan agents serving particular factions, rather than as non-partisan actors fairly applying neutral rules. There are genuine dangers associated with the “freezing of certain foundational political compromises”, as the experience of the US during the 19<sup>th</sup> century illustrates very clearly.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See the discussions of revolutionary *assignats* in France, and other experiments with paper money, Eich, *The Currency of Politics*, 87-88, 95.

<sup>15</sup> Eich, *The Currency of Politics*, 146-149.

<sup>16</sup> Eich, *The Currency of Politics*, 174.

In contrast to Germany and the US, consider the United Kingdom, or the constitutions of countries like Switzerland and Ireland. There is arguably an evolving jurisprudence in the UK, driven particularly by the devolution acts and the Human Rights Act, in which courts have started to distinguish some acts of Parliament from others and to show greater deference to those they deem to have a quasi-constitutional status.<sup>17</sup> In Switzerland and Ireland, and at the sub-federal level in the US, much greater use is made of referendums to amend constitutional provisions. Mechanisms such as these allow greater democratic influence over the constitution, although not always in ways of which liberal political theorists would approve. In the US, many state-level prohibitions on same-sex marriage were passed by ballot initiatives. Swiss referendums have been somewhat notorious for at various times channelling popular anti-Semitism (1893), Islamophobia (2009), or more general xenophobia (2014, which also threatened to badly derail Swiss trade policy). Just how democratic would we want monetary policy to be?

Constitutionalisation of the German or American kind, it seems to me, would produce governance of money that looks a lot like the existing practice of the Federal Reserve or the Bundesbank (and subsequently, the European Central Bank). What would constitutionalisation along British or Swiss lines look like, when thinking about governing money? There is a fundamental trade-off in constitutional theory between independence, on the one hand, and accountability or responsiveness on the other. How we navigate that trade-off depends, in part, on what problem we think we're trying to solve by democratising money. Experience of other domains in which a need for relative stability in policy aims meets a need for technical expertise could helpfully inform our thinking about the institutional mechanisms available for managing a more democratic monetary policy. In working through these questions, I suspect it will be productive to consider how constitutions have proposed to select judges, and how they have regulated the relationship between directly elected representatives and the courts. These constitutional experiences offer us a range of models for how a more democratic governance of money might work.

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<sup>17</sup> In a similar vein, witness the recent constitutional crisis in Israel provoked by the government's plans to revise the Basic Law governing the functioning of the judiciary.

## On the Political (Im)possibilities of Capitalist Money

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The New School

STEFAN Eich's *The Currency of Politics* is a timely book.<sup>1</sup> After decades of depoliticisation, neglect, and a widespread sense that money is an institution best left to technocrats, the monetary responses to the Global Financial Crisis of 2007-08 and the Covid-19 Pandemic have put the political dimension of money back on the agenda.<sup>2</sup> The showering of the private sector<sup>3</sup> in newly created central bank money has prompted a debate among scholars and public commentators about the monetary capabilities of the state – a *monetary interregnum*, as Eich calls it.<sup>4</sup>

The book begins by introducing the two major and competing perspectives in the current debate about money and the state. On one side are the 'mainstream' economists from the neoclassical school, who view money as, primarily, a commodity that originated in the private sector in order to facilitate barter exchanges and overcome the so-called 'double coincidence of wants'. On this account, money allows independent producers in the private exchange economy to trade with one another even when one of the parties offers a commodity the other party does not desire. Accordingly, money is a scarce and private resource that binds the state's fiscal capabilities by the tax revenue it is able to collect.<sup>5</sup>

On the other side are the representatives of the 'iconoclastic' Modern Monetary Theory (MMT, also known as neo-Chartalism), who draw on historical and anthropological evidence to argue that money is actually an accounting tool rooted in relations of debt and credit. Money here represents

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this commentary was first presented on 20 February 2023 in New College College, Oxford at a roundtable on Stefan Eich, *The Currency of Politics: The Political Theory of Money from Aristotle to Keynes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Eich, *The Currency of Politics*, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Especially since it ended up in what Michael Hudson calls the FIRE sector, Finance, Insurance, Real Estate, in turn, causing severe asset price inflation. See Michael Hudson, *Killing the Host: How Financial Parasites and Debt Destroy the Global Economy* (Dresden: Islet, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Eich, *The Currency of Politics*, 2-3.

<sup>5</sup> Eich, *The Currency of Politics*, 4. Some might here argue that this is something of a caricature of the neoclassical point of view, at from the perspective of the latest research. Neoclassical economists do acknowledge that states are not necessarily limited in their sovereign monetary resources but caution against excessive money issuing for reasons related to macroeconomic stability and inflation. It is however important not to conflate the understandings of neoclassical economics now prevalent among academic researchers and the broad understanding of neoclassical economics assumed in much public policy discourse. The latter still requires critique.

a social relationship between creditors and debtors.<sup>6</sup> On this view, the state constitutes the primary money-issuing authority within its territory and is able to introduce it to the economy via ‘deficit spending’. Through the imposition of taxes, citizens, in turn, become debtors to the state. These citizens then aim to acquire state money by producing goods and services to settle these ‘debts’. MMT thus posits that taxes, rather than financing expenditure, simply serve to legitimise a state’s currency and to control liquidity.<sup>7</sup> Hence, the state faces no de facto limitations when it comes to the issuance of money and, therefore, government spending. Instead, it is able to buy anything available for money in the (domestic) economy, and the only limitations lie in ‘real’ productive capacities, such as (natural) resources and (human) labour.<sup>8</sup> For neoclassical economists money is scarce and states ought to be frugal; for proponents of MMT states possess a ‘magic money tree’ and are able to fund projects on a potentially large scale within the limits of the domestic economy.<sup>9</sup>

Both sides of the debate about money as it plays out today have historical precedents. By tracing a genealogy of the dominant ideas that support either side, Eich is able to elucidate some theoretical and practical issues for both the neoclassical and the MMT accounts. On the one hand, Eich illustrates how the neoclassical depoliticisation of modern money relies on a Lockean conception of sound money. The origins of this conception, however, are inherently political, as Locke practically invented and, in turn, fought for the quasi-naturalisation of an unalterable gold standard.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, Eich’s portrayal of the Fichtean origins of MMT shows that, at least as originally conceived, its arguments were confined to the limits of individual and isolated nation states, a scenario that is practically impossible in today’s globalised capitalism.<sup>11</sup>

Eich uses history not only to show that the stories these competing perspectives tell about themselves might not always be accurate. He also wants to demonstrate that:

... in their conscious disagreement with one another, both stories have more in common than they care to admit ... in (rightly) seeking to displace the myth of barter, Chartalism risks swapping one transhistorical assumption for another. Despite their theoretical juxtaposition, the two stories end up mirroring each other. Where politics is entirely absent in the barter account it appears as an undifferentiated mass of taxpower in the Chartalist account ... Crucially, both accounts end up sidestepping a richer political theory of money that is not reducible to commerce or force but

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (New York: Melville House Publishing, 2011), 21-42.

<sup>7</sup> Eich, *The Currency of Politics*, 5.

<sup>8</sup> L Connors and W Mitchell, ‘Framing Modern Monetary Theory’, *Journal of Post Keynesian Economics* 40, no. 2 (2017): 252.

<sup>9</sup> Mariana Mazzucato, *Mission Economy: A Moonshot Guide to Changing Capitalism* (London: Allen Lane, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> Eich, *The Currency of Politics*, 67-70.

<sup>11</sup> Eich, *The Currency of Politics*, 97-101.

suspended between them'.<sup>12</sup>

Both accounts see money purely as a useful invention, a lubricant for economic transactions, leaving underlying political and systemic forces to the wayside. We might say that this is a debate unified by its commitment to liberalism and separated by its disagreements about the 'correct' management of capitalism.

Eich's historical account builds to at least three conclusions, each of which seem correct: that MMT tells the more historically accurate story, that both approaches, however, are wholly insufficient, and that pressure to decide between them rests on a false dichotomy. Does the key to overcoming this false dichotomy perhaps lie in Eich's account of Marx's monetary thought? As Eich rightly points out, Marx's view of money does not fit easily into either side of the current debate.<sup>13</sup>

The strength of Marx's analysis lies in his methodology. His materialism is rooted in the understanding that human activity in its particular social and natural environment is the basis of all social processes. A Marxist analysis of existing social conditions and institutions, as well as the logics and contradictions that underlie them, is, therefore, always historically specific.<sup>14</sup> Rather than offering a general theory of money, the Marxian account provides an inquiry into its current definitive manifestation – capitalist money. Moreover, rather than directly jumping to capital, Marx actually began his analysis of the capitalist mode of production in Volume I of *Capital* with commodities and money in order to answer the overarching question 'how does money become more money'.<sup>15</sup> And when he descended into the 'hidden abode of production', he discovered that under capitalism, products are produced for profit through the exploitation of human labour in a social environment of historically specific class relations.<sup>16</sup>

These products are sold in the sphere of circulation, i.e., the market, thereby turning them into commodities. Once the value of the commodity becomes realised via *monetary* exchange, more money is held by the capitalist than he had prior to the production process and can thus be reinvested in order to expand production.<sup>17</sup> Surplus value has been extracted and realised and money turned into capital. Only when commodities are sold continuously for a profit and ever more money is reinvested can this system continue.<sup>18</sup> Otherwise, the consequences are stagnation, decline, and eventually collapse.

For Eich, too, as per the *Neue Marx Lektüre*, under capitalism money is the

<sup>12</sup> Eich, *The Currency of Politics*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Eich, *The Currency of Politics*, 130.

<sup>14</sup> Claudius Vellay, 'Dialektik und historischer Materialismus' in *Marx für SozialwissenschaftlerInnen—Eine Einführung* eds. I. Artus et al. (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2014), 35.

<sup>15</sup> Werner Bonefeld, 'Capital par excellence: on money as an obscure thing', *Estudios de Filosofía* no. 62 (2020): 49-50; Michael Heinrich, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx's Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2012), 39.

<sup>16</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy: Volume I* (London: Penguin, 1990).

<sup>17</sup> Eich, *The Currency of Politics*, 129; Heinrich, *An Introduction*, 55.

<sup>18</sup> Bonefeld, 'Capital par excellence', 50.

general form of value and serves as an expression of wealth through ‘a social act of abstraction’.<sup>19</sup> Money and production under capitalism are, therefore, ‘two sides of the same coin’ and capitalist production and the money form cannot be separated from one another.<sup>20</sup> And to this we might add that the same logics and contradictions that apply to the capitalist mode of production in general, therefore, also apply to the money form in particular.

Eich here appears to endorse a Marxian account of money. But he also insists elsewhere that money is a malleable and foundational institution of democratic self-rule, a political currency, and that we have to recover its lost political potential.<sup>21</sup> This threatens a tension. To illustrate this point further, Eich, in his Epilogue, argues that money is a collective imagination with emancipatory democratic potential, an assessment that rests in part on his positive reception of Keynesianism and MMT.<sup>22</sup> Contrary to this idealist reading, however, (capitalist) money has to be viewed rather as an ‘accurate depiction of commodified social relations’, as Eich himself writes in his Marx chapter. These two readings are incompatible, since commodified social relations under capitalism thereby constrain monetary possibilities.<sup>23</sup> The need for constant exploitation of human labour on an expanding scale, driven by the profit imperative, ultimately dictates the scope of the political malleability of money under capitalism. As Samir Amin put it in *Accumulation on a World Scale*, there exists a social need for money and ‘the amount of money in circulation [is adjusted] to this need’.<sup>24</sup> While money in the form of credit can stimulate production, it can only do so where money begets more money.<sup>25</sup>

On the world market, these conditions are elevated to the global level. Under capitalism, international relations are dominated by commodified exchange relations that are mediated through the money form in its specific manifestation of world money, the universal equivalent in international transactions.<sup>26</sup> The dominant capitalist powers determine the conditions of these exchanges as they assert their economic influence via the functioning of international capital markets and through their political and military power.<sup>27</sup> The United States emerged as the dominant capitalist power after the Second World War and, subsequently, the US Dollar has appeared as the value form of capital as world money.<sup>28</sup> While the political malleability of money is already severely constrained by the general compulsions of capital in the industrialised

<sup>19</sup> Eich, *The Currency of Politics*, 128-131.

<sup>20</sup> Eich, *The Currency of Politics*, 132.

<sup>21</sup> Eich, *The Currency of Politics*, 1, 6-8.

<sup>22</sup> Eich, *The Currency of Politics*, 219.

<sup>23</sup> Eich, *The Currency of Politics* 219, 133.

<sup>24</sup> Samir Amin, *Accumulation on a World Scale: A Critique of the Theory of Underdevelopment (Volume I and Volume 2 Combined)* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974), 403.

<sup>25</sup> Eich, *The Currency of Politics*, 115; Ingo Stütze, ‘Money makes the world go green?: Eine Kritik der Modern Monetary Theory als geldtheoretisches Konzept’ in *PROKLA Zeitschrift für kritische Sozialwissenschaft*, 51 (2021): 83.

<sup>26</sup> Eich, *The Currency of Politics*, 135-136.

<sup>27</sup> Radhika Desai, ‘China’s Finance and Africa’s Economic and Monetary Sovereignty,’ in Maha Ben Gadha et al. (eds), *Economic and Monetary Sovereignty in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Africa* (London: Pluto, 2021), 34.

<sup>28</sup> Michael Hudson, *Super Imperialism: The Economic Strategy of American Empire* (Dresden: ISLET, 2021), 7-8.



countries of the centre, these constraints are amplified in peripheral economies. Here, the economies have been systematically underdeveloped in order to serve as exporters of primary commodities for the economies of the centre.<sup>29</sup>

Whereas the US government is in charge of issuing and managing the world money form of value (the US Dollar)<sup>30</sup>, peripheral countries have to strictly abide by the capitalist exchange logic according to which they have to produce material goods for the world market in order to be exchanged for world money. This world money is required for purchasing imports, whether that is consumption goods or capital goods.<sup>31</sup> Breaking away from this extractive system has proven next to impossible: the internal development of these economies depends, in the last instance, on external capitalist relations.<sup>32</sup> Import Substitution Industrialisation – which advocates replacing foreign imports with domestic production, failed in the periphery because it did not comply with the needs of global capital accumulation, mediated by the value form of world money. The state is certainly able to give directions by attempting to boost certain industries, but it cannot guarantee the realisation of value, as this can only take place in the market.<sup>33</sup> The dominant forces of capitalism, located in the Global North, gave rise to our contemporary international financial architecture and, therefore, have an interest in maintaining it.<sup>34</sup>

Discussing this architecture, a central banker at the Bank of Ghana once noted to me that ‘the issue is that the current international monetary system does not lead to Pareto optimal outcomes.’<sup>35</sup> Moreover, he added, ‘you are vulnerable, actually, and you have a lot placed on you in the first place ... you must be seen to have some prospects to attract additional capital.’ So, even if we manage to make some changes to its mode of operation, the underlying logics and contradictions of global capital accumulation will still remain in place. Capital is simply not interested in equity, but in expansion. For these reasons, I remain sceptical of the feasibility and effectiveness of pursuing international reform. For peripheral countries under capitalism, MMT proposals that require a ‘magic money tree’ remain a distant dream while the

<sup>29</sup> Amin, *Accumulation on a World Scale*, 3, 17; Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Verso, 1972).

<sup>30</sup> Other capitalist powers in the centre issue ‘satellite’ forms of world money, such as the Euro, the Pound, or the Yen, and are able to acquire US Dollars via central bank swap line arrangements. See Amin, *Accumulation on a World Scale*, 479-480; Hudson, *Killing the Host*, 426; Anne Loscher, ‘Being Poor in the Current Monetary System: Implications of foreign exchange shortage for African economies and possible solutions’, in Ben Ghada et al. (eds), *Economic & Monetary Sovereignty in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Africa* (London: Pluto, 2022), 266.

<sup>31</sup> Amin, *Accumulation on a World Scale*, 460; Löscher, ‘Being Poor,’ 260.

<sup>32</sup> Amin, *Accumulation on a World Scale*, 560, 584.

<sup>33</sup> Stützel, ‘Money makes the world go green?’, 83.

<sup>34</sup> Michael Hudson, *Super Imperialism: The Economic Strategy of American Empire (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition)* (Dresden: ISLET, 2021), 427-428. This point is emphasised by Eich himself in his discussion of Keynes’ failure to reform the international monetary order into a more ‘equitable’ system at the 1944 Bretton Woods Conference. See Eich, *The Currency of Politics*, 213.

<sup>35</sup> Pareto optimality is a concept in neoclassical economics that refers to a situation in which no allocation or action by one party is possible without making the other party worse off. In this specific conversation, it was used rather loosely to refer to equitable outcomes.

political malleability of money lies outside of their control.

It is important here not to leave the state itself out of the equation. As Eich writes, ‘where the state is missing in the economics textbook, in Chartalism it is presupposed and fully formed’.<sup>36</sup> In other words, MMT offers a state theory of money without providing us with a theory of the state. Assessing the role of the state in the capitalist system, however, is crucial if one wants to evaluate the claim that its capacities for money creation can be directed towards democratic, emancipatory ends. According to Marxist scholars like Nicos Poulantzas the capitalist state ‘represents and organizes the dominant class or classes; or, more precisely, it represents and organizes the long-term political interest of a power bloc.’<sup>37</sup> And Michael Heinrich, citing Engels, argues that the state acts as an ‘ideal personification of the total national capital’.<sup>38</sup> So neither the fiscal state nor its money should be considered neutral entities, as liberal MMT proponents would have it. Clara Mattei has demonstrated this empirically in her impressive book, *The Capital Order* (2022), in which she uncovers how the British and Italian states in the Interwar Period actively pursued supposedly counterproductive economic policies of austerity in order to maintain existing capitalist class relations.

While it is certainly true that capitalist money cannot manage itself and that the modern monetary system is structurally dependent on the state, we must also remember that this state is essentially a capitalist one. This means that it primarily serves the interests of (private) capital(s), even if it does so in admittedly independent and sometimes contradictory ways. The key to understanding contemporary monetary policy, then, is the insight that it serves the objective of capital accumulation and the maintenance of the capitalist order in the long run. When the Federal Reserve, for instance, utilises its ability to create money, as it did in order to bail out insurance giant AIG with 85 billion USD in March 2009, this is done to salvage and maintain a stagnating capitalist system.<sup>39</sup> While I agree with Eich that we should reject the extreme (‘Marxian’) claim that legislation on monetary affairs does not matter, such legislation is, nevertheless, limited by the capitalist system as such.<sup>40</sup>

Eich acknowledges that these matters are neither easy nor straightforward to address. His own proposals include tougher financial regulation, the nationalisation of commercial banks, and the democratisation of central banks.<sup>41</sup> But is this enough to bring money under democratic control in a global capitalist system? While I agree with Eich that money is inherently political, we might think that *capitalist* money can never be a political currency in the sense that it could even in principle come under the control of any political entity. On the contrary, it is precisely capitalism with its profit imperative and all of its underlying contradictions that gets in the way of money being able to fulfil its supposed emancipatory potential. Eich’s emphasis lies on the political *possibilities* of money; in dialectical fashion, I

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<sup>36</sup> Eich, *The Currency of Politics*, 5.

<sup>37</sup> Nicos Poulantzas, *State, Power Socialism* (London: Verso, 2000), 127.

<sup>38</sup> Heinrich, *An Introduction*, 206.

<sup>39</sup> Eich, *The Currency of Politics*, 2-3.

<sup>40</sup> Eich, *The Currency of Politics*, 137.

<sup>41</sup> Eich, *The Currency of Politics*, 213-218.

would argue that we ought not to neglect the political *impossibilities* of (capitalist) money.

Eich is right to argue that money is too important to be left to economists, central bankers, and commercial bankers.<sup>42</sup> But so is the economy in general. This does not mean that things are hopeless or that we should embrace political inertia. In fact, political mobilisation might benefit from more and wider discussions about the (im)possibilities of (capitalist) money. But the underlying structures of production have to be taken into account to avoid overly optimistic conclusions. Eich's book is thus a useful stepping stone for more fundamental debates about the nature of our capitalist system as such, as well as the role of money within it.

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<sup>42</sup> Eich, *The Currency of Politics*, 219.

## Author's Response

Stefan Eich  
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I AM deeply grateful to Ian Carroll, Eloise Davies, and Jan Hendricks for their generous and incisive engagement with the book. All three commentators put their fingers on central themes that motivated my own journey through the layers of monetary crises in *The Currency of Politics* but also point to questions beyond the book itself. I cannot answer all of these prompts here and instead want to use this response to focus briefly on the question of constraints. In their own distinct ways, all three commentators perceptively point to the nature of constraints in the realm of monetary politics and ask questions about the scope of democratic rule under modern commercial conditions. Davies raises a powerful sceptical query about whether attempts at democratising money do not ultimately resemble nostalgic calls for returning to ancient republican virtues that cannot but collide with the realities of modern commerce. Hendricks articulates a parallel worry from a Marxist perspective about the scope of monetary malleability under capitalism. Carroll similarly emphasises the dim prospects of more democratic monetary institutions at the international level but also helpfully focuses our attention on constitutional politics as a familiar embodiment of a politics of constraints.

Perhaps surprisingly given the book's concluding epilogue about the prospect of democratising money, the theme of constraints and double binds was very much on my own mind when writing *The Currency of Politics*. Indeed, an interrogation of the seductive attractions of the politics of monetary depoliticisation – as well as its staying power – is a recurring thread of the book, and it forms a crucial dimension of any political theory of money. Most importantly, my point was thus not simply to underwrite nominalist claims of monetary malleability but instead to locate more precisely what scope for monetary politics exists even within the manifold constraints that characterise our international monetary system in an age of globe-spanning commerce, capital mobility, and dollar hegemony.

Foregrounding political struggles over the constructedness of money does not do away with constraints but offers us a different way of understanding the problem. Rather than the now-conventional framing of “the economic limits of modern politics,” as István Hont put it, attending to the politics of money and credit emphasises the ways in which the binds are internal to modern politics itself.<sup>1</sup> Far from dismissing or downplaying limitations, my

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, István Hont, ‘Free trade and the economic limits of modern politics: neo-Machiavellian political economy reconsidered’, in John Dunn (ed.) *The Economic Limits to Modern Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 41-120.

point is instead that these limits, though very real, arise themselves out of political struggles. Instead of economic limits, it would thus be more accurate to speak of the political limits of the politics of money precisely to indicate that these are neither fixed nor external. Rather, these boundaries are the solidified result of past political battles. Indeed, as John Maynard Keynes once observed sympathetically, drawing and maintaining the very separation between politics and economics is from this perspective itself a central, albeit always temporary and necessarily fragile, quest of liberal politics. This means that financial markets are not simply external constraints that place limitations on the scope of modern politics. Instead, they are themselves tools of statecraft and arenas of political contestation. Nowhere is this more clearly visible than within the politics of debt, the powers of credit creation, and the hierarchies of the global monetary system.

To relate this briefly back to Davies's apt provocation about the erstwhile Cambridge School historian and 38-day Chancellor of the Exchequer, this means that Kwasi Kwarteng did not flounder because he dared to go against the gilt markets but because he displayed some extraordinarily poor politics: he failed to offer an even vaguely plausible narrative; he dismissively attacked institutions of economic expertise; and, perhaps most fatally, he intentionally blindsided the crucial power centre that could have guarded his plan, namely the Bank of England. To reduce this bonfire of misjudgements either to a republican morality tale about the chokehold of commerce or a Hontian warning against trespassing the economic boundaries of modern civilisation, would not only fundamentally misread the problem but allow a vainglorious project of spectacular delusion off the hook.

For what it is worth, in his Cambridge dissertation on the Coinage Crisis of 1695, Kwarteng had himself offered the building blocks for a more complex reading.<sup>2</sup> On one level, he invoked the language of constraints and the monetary limits of political sovereignty. While the state's power to settle the extrinsic value of money was a sovereign prerogative, 'in practice the nature of the political regime, the rights of private property, the usefulness of 'credit', and the need to consolidate the moral health of the nation, greatly curbed that prerogative'.<sup>3</sup> But at other times, Kwarteng insisted that 'Money, though an intricate and somewhat arcane subject at all times, was recognized as being inextricably bound up with the state. Money was essentially political'.<sup>4</sup> What bridged the seeming gap between these two positions was the centrality of trust and 'public faith' that undergirded both the rights of property and the politics of money.<sup>5</sup> Ironically, it was precisely public faith and trust that Kwarteng sacrificed so spectacularly some two decades later in pursuit of a fanciful ideological project of regressive tax cuts. But this pointer to the paradoxical politics of trust – rather than a simplistic structural account of the supremacy of finance over politics – is a much better guide to the underlying questions and challenges.

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<sup>2</sup> Kwasi Kwarteng, *The political thought of the recoinage crisis of 1695-7*, PhD.24026, University of Cambridge (submitted July 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Kwarteng, *The political thought of the recoinage crisis*, 163.

<sup>4</sup> Kwarteng, *The political thought of the recoinage crisis*, 116.

<sup>5</sup> Kwarteng, *The political thought of the recoinage crisis*, 290.

Instead of pitting markets against politics, grappling with struggles over monetary power as suspended between violence and trust alerts us to the ways in which even modern capitalist money is a hybrid, always located between the state and financial markets. Instead of a picture in which modern monetary politics is structurally diminished or even eclipsed by economic decisions, this corrective thus begins from a Pocockian observation about the ways in which public credit had itself become an organ of modern statecraft that gave the state a new temporalised orientation toward an open horizon. As the very embodiment of the fusion of law and commerce, modern money does not shed its political dimension but nor can its politics be reduced to sovereign will. Instead, it becomes integrated into a complex web of private and public expectations that defy any straightforward distinction between economic and political domains. That means on the one hand that money and banking, as essential pieces of public infrastructure, are never purely private but tethered to the state and its central bank. It also means inversely, however, that even the state's capacity to steer money creation is embedded in a capitalist frame of value. This is for me one way to bring together Keynes's emphasis on 'money of account' with Marx's value theory. To adapt Marx's quip from the *Eighteenth Brumaire*: states make money but they do not always do so as they please.

The question this leaves us with is how to govern this hybrid and the interdependent relations it produces. States are dependent on banks for credit creation and allocation, but also as transmission channels for monetary policy. Today that interdependence can easily feel like a form of blackmail in which banks are able to leverage an awareness of their own systemic significance. But it is worth remembering – and exploiting – that banks also need the state and the safe assets it creates at least as much as the state needs finance. This relationship of interdependence imposes various double binds, but it also provides underexplored openings and raises a set of undertheorised political questions.

**W**HAT does it mean then to speak of democratising – the always unfinished gerund matters here – the monetary system under contemporary capitalism? First, when pointing to the prospect of democratisation I did not have a fixed ideal of institutionalised rule in mind but instead first and foremost a basic insistence on public debate, accountability, and contestation that have all too often been missing from recent monetary politics. As uncomfortable as it may be to central bankers, this also entails an acceptance and indeed embrace of indeterminacy and uncertainty as the true features of democratic life. To speak of attempts to democratise money was thus not an institutional blueprint but instead a meta-democratic intervention in a Lefortian spirit of open-ended contestation, less interested in issuing policy recommendations or institutional fixes but rather insisting more fundamentally that grappling with questions of monetary power requires as a first step bringing monetary politics back into public debate by making it visible as a form of power that raises fundamental questions of rule and legitimacy. Such democratic engagement includes of course a

consideration of limitations and how to respond to them, but it cannot preemptively void the underlying questions.

This demand for the democratisation of monetary power differs from older republican critiques of commerce as a violator of virtue and is instead a product of interwar struggles over the gold standard and its fraught relation to mass democracy after the expansion of the franchise. One powerful framing of the underlying problem that re-emerged in this context was a twist on long-standing analogies between money and law. Monetary politics is in this sense best understood as a particular kind of constitutional politics over the balance of rules and discretion in the realm of credit creation and monetary power, as the legal historian Christine Desan has articulated most clearly.<sup>6</sup> To insist on seeing the monetary order as a constitutional regime still leaves open what kind of constitution we prefer. Not all constitutions are democratic, and even across the democratic constitutional imagination there are vast differences concerning the degree to which constitutions are meant to act as stages for the conflictual articulation of democratic politics or rather as shields against it. Unsurprisingly, the idea of money as a constitutional project of the latter kind is constitutive to the ordoliberal imagination, and it was central to Hayek's thought before he began to push for the complete "denationalisation" of money during the 1970s.

The ordoliberal account differs subtly but crucially from Keynes's constitutional vision for the politics of money which celebrated the gradual adaptability of the unwritten English constitution in preventing both revolution and ossification. As Keynes pointed out in the 1920s, constitutional defenders of the sacrosanct value of contract and the inviolability of monetary promises as embodiments of public faith had failed to understand the politics of trust which required that contracts that had come to be odious could be amended or even overturned.<sup>7</sup> This stance offers a more dynamic constitutional vision than that of the ordoliberals, one that is potentially more receptive to questions of social justice and inequality, if only—in a Rawlsian twist—because failing to do so would ultimately endanger stability. It insists at the same time on protecting expert knowledge from popular politics, and Keynes remained profoundly wary of fully opening up monetary power to democratic contestation.

The reason I nonetheless ended the book by invoking contemporary calls for greater democratic experimentation is not because I regard Keynes's concerns as trivial. My fundamental point was instead that our democratic vocabulary has atrophied to such an extent that we struggle to perceive, let alone articulate in a coherent manner, those underlying complex choices concerning the politics of money, including the politics of monetary depoliticization. And yet, even within the current monetary system, discretionary decisions with vast distributional ramifications have to be made and are being made every day. Money has to be managed, as Marx's

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<sup>6</sup> Christine Desan, 'The Constitutional Approach to Money', in Nina Bandelj, Frederick F. Wherry, and Viviana A. Zelizer (eds), *Money Talks: Explaining How Money Really Works* (Princeton: University Press, 2017), 109–130.

<sup>7</sup> John Maynard Keynes, *A Tract on Monetary Reform* (London: Macmillan, 1923), reprinted as *The Collected Writings*, Vol. 4, 56–7.

contemporary Walter Bagehot once put it. These are clearly constrained in numerous ways. But even in such a system of constraints it matters who makes these decisions and on what basis.

For Keynes any constitutionalisation of money necessarily had to extend to the international realm, and this insistence culminated in his still radical demand for a new international monetary constitution. This aspect – with its recognisable roots in the eighteenth century – cannot but appear far-fetched and almost utopian to us today, but that does not change that it is more necessary than ever. Democratising money cannot simply mean aligning monetary politics with the will of national assemblies while sidestepping the hierarchies and inequalities of a global monetary system structured around the dollar. Indeed, one can immediately see how democratising the politics of money in the imperial centre of monetary power, namely the US, could easily deepen existing global dependencies. Instead, democratising money in the above sense must transcend narrow debates over the legal status of national central banks to address instead both the design of the underlying banking system as well as the structure of the international monetary system.

I fully recognise of course that we sorely lack the democratic structures for any such endeavour. Instead, we find ourselves in a perverse impasse: precisely where democratic monetary demands are most feasible, they are least satisfactory, whereas where they are most sorely needed – in holding monetary power accountable on the international level – they are most likely to be frustrated. Such remains the ‘incongruence,’ as Hont put it, between bounded territorial states and global financial markets.<sup>8</sup> But rather than deriving from this a disenchanting lesson about the futility of an enlarged democratic and constitutional imagination, I would insist on the exact opposite. To posit the need for democratisation does not imply that our chains are merely imaginary or that they can be cast off through a magical leap of the collective imagination, but rather that democratic politics requires struggling within a system whose horizon of realisation we can nonetheless never reach.<sup>9</sup> The politics of disappointment and struggle against limitations are thus not so much arguments against democracy but form a central part of the democratic experience.

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<sup>8</sup> Istvan Hont, *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation-State in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 56.

<sup>9</sup> See also Astra Taylor, *Democracy May Not Exist But We'll Miss it When It's Gone* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2019).



## The Subversive Potential of Inconsistency

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J EANNIE Morefield's *Unsettling the World* begins with an absence.<sup>1</sup> Where is Edward Said in political theory? Said should need no introduction to political theorists. His theoretical insights on empire, justice, power, critique and oppression, among numerous other topics, are central to the concerns of political theory on any given understanding. Said's 1978 classic *Orientalism* inaugurated the field of postcolonial studies, and his Foucauldian insights pushed those within the discipline of political theory to see how and why they might contend with Foucault. Yet, Morefield argues, professional political theorists are yet to produce a thorough and critical engagement with Edward Said and his work. Morefield's project begins with this historical observation and moves on to do something about it. Over six chapters of exquisite writing, the text shows why Edward Said is a thinker with whom political theorists should be more regularly engaging.

Morefield argues that political theory's occlusion of Edward Said is emblematic of a deeper disciplinary compartmentalization: postwar North American political science segregated fields of inquiry into 'domestic', 'comparative', and 'international'.<sup>2</sup> As such, even though political theorists commit themselves to a critical interrogation of fundamentally large structural concepts such as race, class, gender and sexuality – systems of oppression that are honed transnationally – 'international politics' is ceded to International Relations scholars. Morefield suggests that this creates a double unseeing – 'first unseeing imperialism, then unseeing postcolonial theory and the study of imperialism outside political theory'.<sup>3</sup> This double unseeing stops political theorists from accessing the theoretical insights of scholars who have been marked as belonging to 'other' fields. Edward Said is but one of them. Morefield's book urges theorists to disturb this compartmentalization. What it means to do that, she says, is not simply to cite him, but genuinely and thoroughly to engage him.

What would such an engagement entail? First, Morefield says, it requires of theorists an willingness to 'unsettle'. Morefield fairly warns that political theory cannot uncritically offer itself as a new Saidian house. For if the

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this commentary was first presented on 6 March 2023 in New College, Oxford at a roundtable on Jeanne Morefield, *Unsettling the World: Edward Said and Political Theory* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Morefield, *Unsettling the World*, xxxv.

<sup>3</sup> Morefield, *Unsettling the World*, xl.

inclusion of Said is sincere, political theorists risk an unsettling not just of disciplinary boundaries (between political theory and international relations) but also of the content and methodology with which they are familiar. ‘Said both uses theory and theorizes differently from the way most political theorists use theory and theorize’, Morefield writes.<sup>4</sup> While political theorists err on the side of conceptual closure and parsimony, Said brings an ‘intellectual nomadism’ that others have rightly called ‘theoretically unhoused, methodologically untidy and spatially fluid’.<sup>5</sup> A strength of Morefield’s book is that she makes the case for why this kind of ‘unsettling’ is exactly what contemporary theory needs. Morefield welcomes the discomfort and the critical perspective Said invites. As a long tradition of theorists have shown, and as Morefield reiterates, theory, in both its evolution as a discipline and in many of the arguments its proponents have made, is entangled with imperialism, race and settler colonialism. As such there is much to learn from Edward Said because his manner of theorising and work ‘illuminates the discursive complexities of imperial history’.<sup>6</sup>

How does he do this? Here, Morefield emphasises Said’s insistence that one begin theorising from a place of connection rather than a desire for foreclosure. This does not simply mean requiring close knowledge of the particular contexts about which one writes; it also means scaling out to try and see sociological, political and ideological connections across perhaps quite different contexts. For those housed in the North American academy – the primary object of Morefield’s focus – this means a structural analysis including interrogating who theorises, what is theorised, and what makes theorising possible.

Via meditations on exile, music, humanism, public intellectualism and liberal narcissism, *Unsettling the World* elucidates the depth and range of Said’s theoretical insights and exalts their value for political theory. In a chapter on exile and loss, Morefield presents Said’s unique approach to exile as a position which is generative for critique. For Said, exile was both a ‘necessary habit of life’ for the critic and a completely horrible, frequently intolerable way of living.<sup>7</sup> But Said’s reflections on exile substantially differed from the romantic ideal of exile found in much Western literature by refusing to be preoccupied with the isolated individual thinker. Rather, Said insisted that, by comparison, contemporary exile was a mass phenomenon, gravely violent, and ‘absolutely necessary for critical inquiry’.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, in a chapter on liberal narcissism Morefield utilises Said’s theoretical insights to foreground the irrefutable historical and discursive connections between ‘liberal global order’ and ‘imperialism’.<sup>9</sup> But simply asking ‘is liberalism imperialist?’ – an old question – isn’t enough. In fact, Morefield shows that attempts to answer this question ‘in principle’ are counter-productive. Instead, Morefield suggests that one must

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<sup>4</sup> Morefield, *Unsettling the World*, xlv.

<sup>5</sup> Morefield, *Unsettling the World*, xlvii.

<sup>6</sup> Morefield, *Unsettling the World*, xxv.

<sup>7</sup> Morefield, *Unsettling the World*, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Morefield, *Unsettling the World*, 6.

<sup>9</sup> Morefield, *Unsettling the World*, 175.

once again turn, like Said, to the actual historical and contemporary connections between imperialism and liberalism.

Across the text, Morefield takes on numerous critics of Said who have been frustrated by his resistance to neatness. For example, in the chapter on exile and loss, Morefield addresses the critics who are uncomfortable with the fact that Said sometimes appears to make claims that stand in tension with one another. So, for example, at one point Said speaks of as exile as ‘serving no humanism’, while elsewhere he says that it is ‘absolutely necessary for a critical subjectivity’.<sup>10</sup> Some even remark that his concerns for exilic refugees were disingenuous, his work depoliticising.<sup>11</sup> Morefield addresses this by pointing to Said’s own response to his critics that ‘inconsistencies are at the core of an exilic experience’.<sup>12</sup> ‘Inconsistencies are, Said maintained, at the core of his work because they are the hallmark of the exilic experience, captured in the irritating rub between state violence and individual suffering, between mass migration and the longings of the lonely poetic soul, between political violence and political art’, Morefield writes.<sup>13</sup> However, Morefield insists that these inconsistencies were not simply Said’s intellectual gloss on a generalised exilic experience but rooted in his specific experiences of exile. For Morefield, Said’s work on exile cannot be separated from his occupation as a Palestinian professor in a North American university who could rally resources to resist, in some ways, the violent erasure of exile. But this does not necessarily imply that Said’s elite status, and the positions that status sometimes led him to articulate, undermines his support for Palestinian liberation. By drawing on several examples from Said’s vast range of works, Morefield nuances this charge of ‘elitism’ by pushing the reader in directions that do not ‘foreclose generative and genuinely complex’ ways of reading Said.<sup>14</sup>

However, one wonders if political theory would benefit much more from a critical engagement with Said rather than a wholesale defence of his inconsistencies or lacunae. Given that Morefield’s text inaugurates a detailed engagement with Said as a political theorist, perhaps many other sections of political theory such as Black Political Thought and Feminist Theory, can now be brought into conversation with a Saidian framework. For example, Said’s argument that a desire to detail the complexities of the world be prioritised over an urge for foreclosure for the sake of a ‘theoretical machine’ seemed interestingly similar to Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s reimagining of the university space from a fugitive lens.<sup>15</sup> Said’s *Treason of the Intellectuals* and Moten and Harney’s *Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* are somewhat united in their interrogation of the North American liberal academia for disregarding the not so tenuous connections with imperial labour. Similarly, Said’s theorization of exile as a site of critique reminds the reader of bell

<sup>10</sup> Morefield, *Unsettling the World*, 7.

<sup>11</sup> Morefield, *Unsettling the World*, 8.

<sup>12</sup> Morefield, *Unsettling the World*, 7.

<sup>13</sup> Morefield, *Unsettling the World*, 7.

<sup>14</sup> Morefield, *Unsettling the World*, 156.

<sup>15</sup> Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013), 16.

hooks's insights in theorising marginality as a site of resistance.<sup>16</sup> Said's exile as generative of critical faculty and hooks's urge to reconsider marginality also as a site of radical possibility – both assert that resistance is 'sustained by a remembrance of the past'. Morefield's urgent appraisal of Said also forces one to seek more from Said – for example, to ask, if Said prioritised gender as an important lens for understanding the material processes, institutions and ideology that shaped both resistance and oppression? Especially as so much painstaking academic work has now shown how the conditions of imperialism disproportionately disadvantage those who are left outside the neatness of gender division or those who do not predominantly uphold its values.

Insofar as we might seek theory beyond 'unsettling', the reader is perhaps left wondering: is there also a rehabilitative Said? Morefield's Said can unsettle several fundamental assumptions on which political theory is based. But what might it mean to think of a Said that focuses on 'rehabilitation', post critique? Might there be merit in showing how thinkers such as Said can also help us to rethink central concepts that political theorists often deploy: freedom, equality, justice among them. Perhaps the project of constructing a rehabilitative Said in political theory might also lead us to a closer engagement with his later texts, including *Freud and the Non-European* (2003) or *On Late Style* (2007).

Morefield's book is especially welcome at a time when the dilemmas of intellectualising from a position of exile cannot be ignored. It is difficult to see the subversive potential of exile when almost two million people are being displaced from Palestine, a fact that makes a conversation about theory's implication in present imperialism even more urgent. In a 1984 essay 'Reflections on Exile' Said recounts the time he met Faiz Ahmed Faiz, whom he calls 'the greatest of contemporary Urdu poets'. Faiz was also an exiled poet, forced to move out of his homeland by Zia Ul Haq's military regime in Pakistan and stationed in Beirut at the time.<sup>17</sup> Said's poignant description merits quotation in full:

To see a poet in exile – as opposed to reading the poetry of exile – is to see exile's antinomies embodied and endured with a unique intensity. Several years ago I spent some time with Faiz Ahmed Faiz...naturally, his closest friends were Palestinian, but I sensed that although there was an affinity of spirit between them, nothing quite matched – language, poetic convention, or life history. Only once, when Eqbal Ahmed, a Pakistani friend and a fellow exile came to Beirut, did Faiz seem to overcome his sense of constant estrangement. The three of us sat in a dingy Beirut restaurant late one night, while Faiz recited poems. After a time, he and Eqbal stopped translating his verses for my benefit but as the night wore on, it did not matter. What I watched required no translation: it was an enactment of a homecoming expressed through defiance and

<sup>16</sup> bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984).

<sup>17</sup> Edward Said, 'Reflections on Exile', *Granta* 13 (1984): <https://granta.com/reflections-on-exile/>

loss, as if to say, 'Zia, we are here'.

Said's account of this meeting reaffirms Morefield's insight that Said was comfortable with contradiction. At the same time, it shows another Said – one who is hesitant to engage in any kind of broad generalization even when reflecting on his own exilic intellectual experiences.

## Counterpoint, Late Style, Polyphony

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JEANNE Morefield opens her new book, *Unsettling the World*, with poet Mahmoud Darwish’s elegy for Edward Said.<sup>1</sup> The elegy, ‘Tibaq’ or ‘Antithesis’, is a good introduction to the motif which runs through Morefield’s book and holds it together: Said’s idea of ‘contrapuntal’ reading and writing, by which the dominant narratives of the imperial core and the perspectives of the colonised are analysed simultaneously. Darwish not only mirrors Said’s use of counterpoint in his poem; he was himself an important influence on it. Said read and translated, for example, Darwish’s Palestinian Declaration of Independence, a document which communicates well the kind of composite and exilic Palestinian identity advanced by the PLO during that period.<sup>2</sup>

Edward Said takes the notion of contrapuntal analysis from music—from his life as a pianist—where counterpoint refers to the relationship between two or more melodic lines, simultaneously independent and interdependent: they create a higher harmonic whole, but crucially there is also an element of friction, the possibility of notes being set against one another. Counterpoint puts us in the realm, then, of what the Soviet literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin called ‘polyphony’, which he associated primarily with Dostoevsky’s novels: “a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses”<sup>3</sup> which, in dialogue, created a truth that could not be contained by any one consciousness. Said suggests, however, that this truth might be contained within the contrapuntal consciousness of the exile.<sup>4</sup> Where Bakhtin thinks that Dostoevsky *creates* this kind of polyphony, Said uses counterpoint in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) as a practice of criticism, as a means of exploring the imperial connections contained—but half-buried—within a novel like *Mansfield Park*.<sup>5</sup>

How useful is counterpoint for political theorists? Said and Morefield

<sup>1</sup> A version of this commentary was first presented on 6 March 2023 in New College, Oxford at a roundtable on Jeanne Morefield, *Unsettling the World: Edward Said and Political Theory* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Karma Nabulsi provides an excellent Rousseauian reading of the text in her ‘Being Palestinian’, *Government and Opposition* 38, no. 5 (2003): 479–496.

<sup>3</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 6–7.

<sup>4</sup> We might think too here about W. E. B. Du Bois’s conception of double consciousness in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).

<sup>5</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993).

make a compelling case for it. My own attraction to it and reservations about it are inseparable. Counterpoint combines lots of different kinds of relations in one: it simultaneously suggests a shared whole—a shared history—while also assuming co-constitutive differentiation, identity-formation by opposition, one melody defining itself in opposition to the other. Describing the contrapuntal connections between Palestinian and Israeli identity, Morefield writes:

...for Said, Palestinian and Israeli identities have co-evolved through the unfolding colonialist logic of the mandate period, the massive immigration of displaced Holocaust survivors from Europe, the Palestinian exodus of 1948, the 1967 war, the first Intifada, the rise of Hamas, the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, the ongoing land dispossession, and the brutal geographic incising and settler colonial dispossession that continues to this day.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, violence has escalated even further since the most recent Netanyahu cabinet was formed in December of 2022—the most far-right government in Israeli history, which has described West Bank settlement expansion as its top priority.<sup>7</sup> Even parts of the IDF are horrified by the scale of the violence; a senior IDF general described the march on Hawara as a “pogrom”; the Finance Minister, meanwhile, a Religious Zionist, has said that the village should be “wiped out” by the Israeli state.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, a contrapuntal approach is supposed to evoke a kind of worldly humanism, emphasising cosmopolitan connections between human cultures and their shared inheritances.

Holding together seemingly impossible tensions is in some sense the point of a contrapuntal analysis. But are there not political limits to such an approach? Consider, for example, the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra,<sup>9</sup> founded by Said and the Argentine-Israeli conductor Daniel Barenboim in 1999, which brought together young Arab and Israeli musicians into one orchestra. As Timothy Brennan documents in his recent biography of Said, this project was hugely important to Edward and Mariam Said, with Mariam keeping the torch alive after Edward died. It was created, however, before the call for BDS; the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel has since criticised the orchestra for normalising relations with Israel. Most of Said’s other family members have also been critical of it. This dispute perhaps gets at two (incompatible?) versions of counterpoint: one which

<sup>6</sup> Morefield, *Unsettling the World*, 47.

<sup>7</sup> For context: this commentary was first presented on 6 March 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Al Jazeera and News Agencies, ‘Palestine’s Huwara should be wiped out: Top Israeli minister’, 1 March 2023: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/1/israel-arrests-settlers-after-anti-palestinian-pogrom>

<sup>9</sup> The orchestra was named after Goethe’s poetry collection inspired by Hafez, the *West-östlicher Divan* (1819).

emphasises a harmonious vision of cooperation—Mariam Said has invoked counterpoint to defend the orchestra’s philosophy—and another which reveals discordant, atonal opposition.

Said’s final book *On Late Style*, compiled posthumously by Michael Wood and published in 2006, argued that ‘lateness’, like exile, can also give rise to a plurality of vision, a contrapuntal awareness of simultaneous dimensions and a home which is irrevocably lost. In these essays we see Said grapple with Adorno most seriously—in an interview he joked that he was the “only true follower” of Adorno.<sup>10</sup> On Adorno’s reading, as Beethoven approached death his work proclaimed, in Rose Subotnik’s words, that ‘no synthesis is conceivable.’<sup>11</sup> Instead, there are only the ‘remains of a synthesis, the vestige of an individual human subject sorely aware of the wholeness, and consequently the survival, that has eluded it forever.’<sup>12</sup> In Said’s words:

For Adorno...[Beethoven’s last works] constitute an event in the history of modern culture: a moment when the artist who is fully in command of his medium nevertheless abandons communication with the established social order of which he is a part and achieves a contradictory, alienated relationship with it. His late works constitute a form of exile ... [They] remain unreconciled, uncoopted by a higher synthesis ... their irresolution and unsynthesised fragmentariness are constitutive, neither ornamental nor symbolic of something else. [They] are in fact about ‘lost totality’, and are therefore catastrophic.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, Said is here writing as much about Adorno (and himself) as about Beethoven: remorselessly alienated and exiled; his thought resistant to any kind of reconciliation; his work—and here Said is explicitly talking about Adorno—‘like a contrapuntal voice intertwined with fascism, bourgeois mass society, and communism, inexplicable without them, always critical and ironic about them.’<sup>14</sup>

How might we compare the exilic writing of Adorno and the Frankfurt School with Said’s? Morefield writes that Said ‘parts company with Adorno’ over the ‘exilic intellectual’s “special duty” to actively *resist* this world both intellectually and politically.’<sup>15</sup> Said himself certainly did worry that Adorno injects Marxism with ‘a vaccine so powerful as to dissolve its agitational force

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<sup>10</sup> Said takes the phrase ‘late style’ from Theodor Adorno, ‘Late Style in Beethoven’ [1937] in Theodor W. Adorno, *Essays on Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 564–567.

<sup>11</sup> Rose Rosengard Subotnik, ‘Adorno’s Diagnosis of Beethoven’s Late Style: Early Symptom of a Fatal Condition’, *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 29, no. 2 (1976): 242–275, at p. 270.

<sup>12</sup> Subotnik, ‘Adorno’s Diagnosis’.

<sup>13</sup> Edward Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 4–8.

<sup>14</sup> Said, *On Late Style*, 14.

<sup>15</sup> Morefield, *Unsettling the Word*, 146.



almost completely.<sup>16</sup> But Said also writes that unlike many of his counterparts, Adorno never pretended to an apolitical neutrality. And—dare I say it—Said at times adopted an apolitical stance towards the university. In fact, Said called campus security to have anti-Vietnam student protestors ejected when they disrupted his class around the same time that Adorno called the police on his own student protestors. In 2000, meanwhile, Said claimed that ‘in 30 years of teaching, I’ve never taught a course on the Middle East. I don’t believe in politicizing the classroom.’ How should we understand what Said means here, especially in relation to his political theory?

Outside the classroom, Said was famous as a public intellectual and a Palestinian activist. But he also came from a left tradition—influenced strongly, for example, by post-Lukácsian writers—and I wonder if that tradition’s hostility to totality also influenced Said. His work, as *Unsettling the World* makes clear, resists the overly neat closures of analytic political theory. Perhaps this comes from his involvement in the messiness of real politics; perhaps it comes partly from the practice of literary criticism itself. But perhaps it can also be situated within a broader tradition of left-wing melancholia, intellectual exile, and catastrophe.

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<sup>16</sup> Said, *On Late Style*, 8.

## Author's Response

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I WOULD like to begin by thanking Simple Rajrah and Samuel Holcroft for their extraordinarily thoughtful responses to *Unsettling the World*. It is a rare treat to have a print conversation with people who have taken the time to engage so closely and carefully with your work. It is also equally rare to find that you are largely in agreement with their criticisms. Both Rajrah and Holcroft quite rightly observe that my book is extraordinarily light on criticism of Said's work (public and scholarly) and his activism. In Rajrah's words, 'one wonders if political theory would benefit much more from a critical engagement with Said rather than a wholesale defense of his inconsistencies or lacunae'. Indeed, Rajrah is being too generous here. I am the first to admit that there is an almost fan-girl like quality to the book at times.

To this I can only respond: *Unsettling the World* is an over-correction, written in an extended fit of pique at political theory's glaring lack of interest in a man whose work shaped the very intellectual environment in which we theorize. More crucially, my uncritical orientation toward Said in the book is also overdetermined by my growing conviction that the field's refusal to see Said mirrors the field's refusal to see imperialism in itself, and that this refusal has political consequences. In other words, I am increasingly convinced, it isn't enough to simply engage the co-constituting relationship between imperialism and political theory in the textual / political / material entanglements of the past. Instead, like Said, we need to be constantly interrogating the indwelling traces of imperial ordering, imperial culture, imperial violence, and imperial geography in the structuring terminology and conceptual vocabulary that is the bread and butter of political theory today. In the book, I channelled Said's irrepressible will to unsettle everything—everywhere—all—the-time—all—at—once into a vexed attack on mainstream political theory for not interrogating these traces in everything we do everywhere—all—the-time—all—at—once.

Hence, the book overcorrects by leaning so hard on the disruptive utility of Said's criticisms that it neglects criticism of Said. Indeed, as I re-read the book now, I am a little amazed (and slightly embarrassed) by my willingness to turn even the most maddening of Said's vices – e.g. his refusal to resolve *anything* – into virtues.

All of this means I am deeply sympathetic to nearly all of Rajrah's and Holcroft's criticisms. For instance, I too wonder, with Rajrah, what would have happened if Said had 'prioritised gender as an important lens for

understanding the material processes, institutions and ideology that shaped both resistance and oppression'. What, for instance, would Said's account of the 'imaginative geography' of Orientalism have looked like had he taken the time to develop the obviously gendered notions of masculinity, sexuality, veiling, and secrecy that structure the cultural formations and species of power-knowledge he describes? What imaginaries for resistance might be revealed through these engagements? Or, what would we find if we took more seriously Holcroft's critique of Said's overly rosy attitude toward the university as a location free from precisely the kinds of power knowledge he spent his career excavating? What forms of politics might he have unintentionally offloaded to an ideal space in the process of interrogating non-ideal politics? Is there an irredeemable naiveté at work in Said's commitment to the university in our neoliberal era?

At the same time, I want to push back gently against two related criticisms that Rajrah and Holcroft make about Said's project in general and in the context of my book. These observations both circle around a version of the same question: when is Said's unsettled criticism simply ineffective, or worse, defeatist? For Rajrah, this question is one of theoretical urgency. At what point, she asks, do we query the benefits of a relentlessly unsettling, exilic project and instead start exploring the 'rehabilitation' qualities of 'post critique'? 'Might there be merit', she argues, 'in showing how thinkers such as Said can also help us to rethink central concepts that political theorists often deploy: freedom, equality, justice among them?'

My irritatingly Saidian response to this is yes. And no. Said simply did not believe in 'post critique' but this did not mean that he was against – or that his work can't be used in the service of – 'rethinking' key concepts in political theory. But that 'rethinking' can never be 'rethought'. A Saidian disposition, I suggest, demands that theory be wary of the fixity that 'rehabilitation' projects engender. In other words, for Said, 'rethinking' concepts like 'freedom, equality, and justice' from an exilic perspective means reading them 'not simply as they are, but as they have come to be that way', a project that can never be totally 'rehabilitative' in the context of a world striated with imperial power knowledge.<sup>1</sup> For instance, he once argued, any search for what might constitute a 'just peace' in Palestine-Israel that attempts to move beyond critique inevitably find itself 'at the starting point, looking for a solution now, even as that 'now' itself bears all the marks of our historical diminishment and human suffering'.<sup>2</sup> Because 'freedom, equality, and justice' – and 'peace' – are worldly concepts, embedded in history and power, they cannot be read otherwise. A Saidian inclined theorist, I thus argue in the book, is constantly on their guard against re-concretising and re-essentialising concepts. This doesn't mean that we give up hope for the thinking the world otherwise. It does mean, however, that the critical process of worldly reassessment follows the horizon of possibility into the future.

Holcroft asks a similar question about Said, but his concerns are political rather than theoretical. Yes, he argues, 'holding impossible tensions together'

<sup>1</sup> Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 60.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Said, 'A Method for Thinking About a Just Peace', in Pierre Allan and Alexis Keller (eds.), *What Is a Just Peace?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 190.

is all well and good but, is there ‘a point at which, politically, this becomes inadvisable’. The example he provides is of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra (started by Said and Daniel Barenboim) which has become the subject of BDS criticism. My response to this critique is not unlike my response above: yes. And no. Obviously, there are times when Said’s absolute commitment to the phrase, ‘never solidarity before criticism’ can undermine political coalitions in the moment.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, as Said’s long history of involvement with the PLO in the 1970’s and 80’s attests, ‘never solidarity before criticism’ does not mean *never* solidarity, nor does it mean that we don’t take sides. But, he insisted, even in the midst of political battle, when ‘one is unmistakably on one side against another, there should be criticism’. There must, Said continued, ‘be critical consciousness if there are to be issues, problems, values, even lives to be fought for’.<sup>4</sup> Nothing exemplifies this commitment to criticism better than Said’s prescient rejection of the Oslo Accords which he quite rightly predicted would lead to an increasingly restrictive, Byzantine forms of apartheid. His refusal, in the face of massive political pressure, to set aside his interpretation of the contrapuntal history that shaped the political geography of Palestine–Israel, is testament to the power and necessity of ‘inadvisable’ criticism before solidarity.

Importantly, for Said, critical exilic consciousness looked different in the context of those broad, Third Worldist goals embraced by the PLO in the 1970’s and 80’s than it did in the context of the narrow, accommodationist politics of the PLO in the 1990’s. One assumes that it would look still different today, in the stark light of Israel’s ongoing genocide in Gaza and the internal displacement, as Rajrah points out, of two million people. However different these contexts, and regardless of whether the urgency of today diminishes the ‘subversive potential’ of exilic criticism, for Said, that criticism provided the contrapuntal thread that ties the fight for Palestine together with the global, anti–imperial struggle and with the history of imperialism itself.

Perennially inhabiting a critical disposition that never stops to rest can be utterly exhausting and sometimes deeply irritating for the people around you. One gets the sense that people sometimes felt this about Said and that he sometimes felt it about himself. The exilic intellectual, he once argued, ‘tends to be happy with the idea of unhappiness, so that dissatisfaction bordering on dyspepsia, a kind of curmudgeonly disagreeableness, can become not only a style of thought, but also a new, if temporary, habitation’.<sup>5</sup> He called this type of intellectual a ‘ranting Thersites’, but I think a ‘ranting Casandra’ is an equally appropriate name for an equally irritating disposition. At the end of the day, Said himself was often clearly exhausted by the work it took to inhabit this disposition – to live as an unsettled, exilic critic – and this is an exhaustion both Rajrah and Holcroft rightly associate with those moments in *Late Style* when he expressed a poignant, almost melancholic, longing for stillness. And yet, I want to insist, even in that late moment, in the midst of melancholy, Said was still reminding us that the ‘precarious exilic realm’ can be neither a

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<sup>3</sup> Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, 32.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Said, ‘Secular Criticism’ in *The World, The Text, and The Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).

<sup>5</sup> Said, *Representation of the Intellectual*, 53.

place of retreat nor a place where we ‘search for solutions’. Instead, he ends the last passage of one of his last books, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, by affirming that only within this realm, can we ‘truly grasp the difficulty of what cannot be grasped and then go forth to try anyway’.<sup>6</sup>

I realize full well the irony of ending this exchange by doubling down on precisely the thing I began by admitting: I am an uncritical champion of Said the critic. Rajrah and Holcroft are right to observe this, and I truly look forward to reading more of their insightful (and no doubt, more balanced work) on Said in the future. And yet, I also just want to point out that the three of us *are* having an exchange about Said and we are doing so in the context of talking about political theory at Oxford. This wouldn’t have been possible that long ago. I’m not convinced it took such a vociferous over-correction on my part – sometimes uttered in the voice of a ranting Thersites, more often in the urgent trill of a Cassandra – to make that conversation possible. But I like to think it helped to kick a Said-shaped hole in the door.

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<sup>6</sup> Edward W. Said, ‘The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals’, in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 144.