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AN EDITORIAL

Public Political Philosophy

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Abstract

Political philosophy is often said to stand at an uneasy distance from everyday politics. On one side lie the often-abstract normative arguments of philosophers; on the other, the messy, power-saturated realities of political life; and in between, what seems to be a sizable gulf in aims, topics, and practices that limits their mutual relevance. Taking that gap as both a diagnosis and a provocation, this issue draws together a diverse group of political philosophers to explore why it persists, why it matters, and how it might be reduced. This introduction sets the stage for that discussion in three ways. First, it advances a principled argument for the inescapability of public political philosophising. Beyond familiar pragmatic pressures to demonstrate relevance or impact, it argues that political philosophy is intrinsically bound to public life, and that both philosophers and public actors have good principled reasons to engage with one another. Second, it offers a conceptual map of the contributions organised around three themes: the varied ways political philosophers have engaged with the public, the growing integration of public voices and empirical methods into philosophical reasoning, and the experimental and innovative practices through which public political philosophy is reshaping the boundaries of the discipline itself. Third, it reflects on our own experience guest editing the collection, highlighting how the somewhat serendipitous discovery of a hugely varied and inventive field of contemporary public political philosophising—far exceeding anything we had anticipated—pushed us to rethink some of our own assumptions and preconceptions.

Keywords: democratic deliberation; impact; philosophical methodology; political philosophy; public engagement

This issue of *Public Humanities* examines the gap between political philosophy and everyday politics. It starts from two premises: that such a gap exists, and that it should be reduced. Of the two, the first is probably the less controversial. Undoubtedly, *some* political philosophers have played a prominent role in public life. Depending on your theoretical perspective or political inclination, you might point here to John Stuart Mill's liberal parliamentarianism, Frantz Fanon's involvement in the Algerian Revolution, Hannah Arendt's coverage of the Eichmann trial, Karl Marx's organising role in the emerging socialist movement of his day, or one of many other influential public figures from the history of political thought. Alternatively, you might turn the spotlight to one of the prominent publicly active theorists of our own time, from Phillip Pettit's collaboration with Zapatero to Mary Warnock's chairing of influential inquiries on special education and embryology, William Galston's work in the Clinton administration, Amartya Sen's far-reaching contributions to

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international development, and beyond.[1] But whatever their respective merits as exemplars or case studies, it remains the case that these examples are so famous and discussed precisely because they are exceptional rather than typical. Once we turn away from the celebrated exemplars, it is fairly clear that most political philosophy unfolds at a significant distance from practical politics, with political philosophers usually toiling away on questions far removed from the daily demands of the political to-and-fro, and political actors generally showing little interest in the arguments or conclusions coming out of political philosophy.

But even as that gap is widely acknowledged, disagreements persist about its extent, character, and potential remedies, several of which play out across the contributions to this very issue. Before turning to them, though, we should consider the second (and, I take it, more controversial) of the two premises. Many on both sides of the theory/practice divide think that having a gap between the two is (in one way or another) a good thing. Some political philosophers view the philosophical vocation as centred around a search for truth that is fundamentally at odds with the contingencies, compromises, and power-saturated bargaining that define political life.[2] Here, the fear is that drawing philosophy too close to political practice risks eroding what is distinctive about the discipline, subordinating it to the immediacy of policy demands, and thus turning a critical and reflective enterprise into a merely instrumental tool of governance. For those caught up in the rough and tumble of practical politics, meanwhile, political philosophy can come across as an exercise in using esoteric reasoning to tackle rarefied questions that ultimately has little to do with the on-the-ground realities of public life and political practice. The needs of the policymakers at the sharp end of that practice, for instance, centre around actionable guidance and pragmatic judgement in context, and we might think that those sorts of things are not really part of the philosopher's wheelhouse. And beyond the issue of relevance, there are deeper worries about whether and why philosophers' judgements ought to be elevated above those of other citizens (some philosophers themselves think this smacks of an epistemic elitism that is at odds with their democratic commitments).[3] Or to put the point a little more sharply, we might say that in a period where the authority of experts to speak on political matters is widely questioned, it is fair to ask why the public should care what the philosophers think.

One response to these doubts is to approach the issue pragmatically. There are indeed strong practical imperatives to close the gap on both sides. Like other academics today, political philosophers face mounting pressure to demonstrate the wider relevance of their work, engage with the public, and deliver "impact." Given the centrality of these demands in hiring, promotion, funding, and redundancy decisions, becoming and remaining a *professional* political philosopher these days often depends on your ability to reach beyond the academy. Those pressures themselves have arisen because cash-strapped states (and other non-state funding bodies) rarely countenance supporting research that does not deliver a practical bang for their limited bucks. The taxpayers and feepayers who ultimately foot much of the bill have a similar interest in ensuring that the philosophical work they indirectly support is not an insular exercise, but contributes (in one way or another) to solutions that matter beyond the university's walls. So even sceptical academics,

1 Many of these examples are (quite rightly) both very famous and much discussed. See, for instance, Floyd 2022, 133–37; Hamilton 2019; Martí and Pettit 2012.

2 De Shalit 2020, 11–12.

3 Archard 2025, 18–19; see also De Shalit 2020, 4–5.

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policymakers, and members of the public have good pragmatic reasons to consider how the gap between philosophical enquiry and political practice might be closed.

These pragmatic arguments, though, apply just as much to many areas of research beyond political philosophy. So to push the argument a little further, we might also consider whether there is something distinctive about the discipline of political philosophy itself that provides more fundamental reasons to bridge the theory/practice divide. Beyond the immediate practical pressures of academic life as they happen to be today, we might think there are *principles* at stake here; and if so, then political philosophers (of all people) can scarcely overlook them, as attending to the practical consequences of normative principles is very much at the heart of what their discipline is all about. It may even be the case that once we put together this kind of principled argument, we find that what the principles require does not coincide with what the practical pressures demand. Absent a principled assessment, there is a real risk that in uncritically adopting the sort of public intellectual role fostered by the standard practices and metrics of the modern university, political philosophers end up missing, distorting, or even outright undermining their principled public responsibilities. Some of the contributors to this volume make that worry explicit, offering critical diagnoses of the sorts of public roles cultivated by the prevailing profit-driven, market-oriented logic that characterises what is commonly described as the neo-liberal university.[4]

To make such a principled case, we might start by noting that the sorts of things political philosophers usually do—arguing about values, presenting and critiquing ideas, making and contesting claims, and so on—are a part of political practice whether we like it or not, and have to be dealt with no matter how much one strives to be nothing but a pragmatist. As Jonathan Wolff notes, modern policy challenges are rarely straightforwardly technical, almost always hinging instead on clashes and trade-offs between values (this is part of what makes them *challenges*).[5] More widely, even a cursory observation of our daily political interactions suggests they are saturated with principles and concepts and critiques and arguments of exactly the sort that preoccupy the discipline of political philosophy (this is part of what makes them *political*, at least according to some philosophers).[6] Given that this normative, contestatory, argumentative element of political life is pervasive, this gives us good reasons to consult the political philosophers for whom that sort of thing is their daily bread and butter. More strongly, if that element is an unavoidable part of politics (as some political philosophers suggest), then however critical one might be of political philosophy as a practice or a profession, we should hesitate before trying to banish the philosophers entirely from political life, since rather than ushering in a cleaner, more technocratic politics, this risks merely conceding the normative field to other actors and influences. At best, this might bring an uncritical adherence to the normative status quo.[7] At worst, it could hand the terrain of public reasoning to those already eager to exploit it, from partisan influencers and culture-war entrepreneurs to the purveyors of disinformation, conspiracy theories, and guru-style figures like Andrew Tate.[8]

For political philosophers themselves, it is difficult to maintain the idea that one can turn entirely away from practical concerns in pursuit of abstract truth. For one, those practical

4 Hamilton 2025; see also Brown 2023, 90–109.
5 Wolff 2011, 4–9.
6 Burelli 2021; see also Floyd 2019, chap. 4.
7 Keynes 2017, chap. 24.
8 Archard and Davies 2025, 7–9; Floyd 2019, 126–29.

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matters are, ultimately, the central subject of their enquiries (this is *political* philosophy we are talking about here). It would hardly do for political philosophy to develop theorems that hold in a realm of abstract concepts, but which tell us nothing about the political lives of real people.[9] Or to borrow David Miller's pointed turn of phrase, we must remember that political philosophy is ultimately concerned not with abstract universals but with "principles for Earthlings," and this means it is incumbent on anyone wanting to call themselves a political philosopher to properly attend to the political facts on the ground.[10] Moreover, where other kinds of academics (and other kinds of philosophers) focus on understanding the world as it is, political philosophers are generally concerned with how the world ought to be (or ought not be). Their work is thus inherently future-oriented, action-guiding, and normative in ways that other disciplines rarely are (and usually only are indirectly). Given this, the suggestion that political philosophers need not engage with practical matters seems to rest on the peculiar idea that the imperatives of political philosophy bind everyone but the philosophers themselves, who may remain aloof from the demands and messy realities of their own prescriptions. We might think, then, that there is something internally inconsistent (or perhaps even oxymoronic) about the idea of a *private* political philosopher. If so, it becomes hard to disagree with Karl Marx's famous exhortation that theoretical activity cannot satisfy itself with merely interpreting the world, but must also seek to change it.[11]

This is just one way to make the case for public political philosophy: there are many others, several of which appear across the contributions to this issue of *Public Humanities.* Indeed, as I have already hinted, readers might be surprised by the sheer diversity of those contributions, from the plurality of viewpoints they represent to the arguments they contain, principles they espouse, or practical programmes and wider visions they defend. So beyond rough agreements on our two premises, there are many differences herein over *what* ought to be done, *how* to do it, and exactly *why* we should.

The extent of these differences surprised even your guest editors. This reflects both the complex, multifaceted nature of the challenges at the heart of this issue, and the creativity with which different philosophers have sought to address them. Examining the public role of political philosophy raises some difficult and far-reaching questions, starting with the precise meaning and scope of our three titular terms, "public," "political," and "philosophy." This has provided a vantage point for our contributors to engage in some fundamental rethinking of the nature and purpose of their discipline. Taken together, these contributions reveal the inventive ways in which scholars are pushing at the boundaries of philosophical practice, experimenting with new forms of engagement, and reimagining what political philosophy can be and do. So beyond the familiar cases of policy influence or broad public visibility—important though these remain—much of what emerges here is distinctly avant-garde, showcasing the innovative, sometimes unexpected strategies through which political philosophers (past and present) have attempted to bridge the theory-practice divide.

The somewhat serendipitous result of putting together this collection has been to uncover a field alive with experimentation, far exceeding anything we expected to find. The challenge this has presented has been arranging such diverse contributions in a way that makes plain their principal concerns, points of difference, and guiding questions without occluding what makes them richly distinctive. The job of putting together this collection prompted your guest editors into some critical self-reflection of their own, in that making sense of what we

9 Burelli 2021, 987–88.
10 Miller 2013, chap. 1.
11 Marx 1976, 5.

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found required us to reconsider—or even outright abandon—some of our own preconceptions about the nature, motives, and means of public political philosophising. To capture what we think are the important lessons to be taken from that self-reflective exercise, we have split our contribution to this issue into two parts: in this introduction, one of us (George Boss) offers an overview of the three themes that, in our view, capture the principal lines of enquiry running through this collection; later, the other (Jonathan Floyd) gives his response both to this introduction, and to the collection as a whole.

1. What public political philosophy offers

The first theme concerns the public offering of political philosophy. The most direct way to understand that offering is to view political practice as an application of philosophical principles. In this model—we might call it a "top-down," "philosophy first," or even "philosopher king" approach—philosophical reasoning is used to identify the timeless principles that ought to guide political life, and which in turn prescribe a series of political choices and decisions to be actioned.[12] These days, this is not a very popular model. Most (though not all) philosophers reject it as both objectionably anti-democratic and as insensitive to the complex practicalities of consensus-building, negotiation, power relationships, path dependency, and political calculation involved in real-world policy work.

A more common approach views the political philosopher as a policy problem-solver. Here, rather than dictating policy prescriptions, the political philosopher contributes to the policy process as one expert voice among many. This typically involves the sort of committee and advisory work conducted by some of the most high-profile contemporary political philosophers—like Sen, Warnock, Wolff, Onora O'Neill, and others—and which is neatly outlined in Wolff's much-read book, *Ethics and Public Policy.* Herein, Ian Olasov's contribution describes this as a "bureaucratic model." Using their particular subject expertise and skills, the political philosopher works within the policy process to illuminate the moral choices at play, clarify the normative stances of different policy stakeholders, diagnose flawed normative reasoning, and (it is hoped) move the debate towards an intersubjective agreement that represents incremental moral progress. The value of such a model is that it can improve both the policy *process*—by enhancing the quality of deliberation—and its *outcome*—by promoting the most normatively defensible choice within the scope of feasible policy options. As Olasov makes clear, though, this approach is largely an elite exercise: the "public" here is the public of "public policy," and the strategy is focused on the folks generally referred to as "policymakers," rather than the wider public; that is, the "public" of "member of the public." On that basis, Olasov highlights three other models, all of which—he argues—are more participatory than the bureaucratic model.

I'll be returning to Olasov's contribution later. Before doing so, this section will explore an alternative model of public political philosophy advocated by several other contributors. To draw a contrast with both the Platonic philosopher-king and the policy-oriented philosopher-advisor, we might label this model the philosopher-citizen.[13] On this view, the political philosopher shifts their focus from behind-the-scenes policy work to the arena of public reasoning, and their audience from elite policymakers to their fellow citizens. Here, the political philosopher works to improve the quality of public discourse, analysing the vague terms of political rhetoric, unpacking the normative commitments advanced by

12 Archard 2025, 18–19; Wolff 2011, 9.

13 Claassen 2011.

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different groups, offering their own analysis and critique of those commitments, and occasionally putting forward proposals for public reflection. Adam Swift calls this approach a kind of democratic underlabour, clearing the conceptual ground and clarifying the stakes at play so that the *demos* can get on with things without being hindered by conceptual confusions or dragged into avoidable argumentative muddles.[14] Jonathan Floyd describes it as a philosophical task of clarification and conversation, rather than conversion.[15]

Taking up Floyd's account, Sarah Stitzlein considers the role of public political philosophy within the field of education. Public debates about schooling, as she notes, are often mired in the sorts of unclear concepts, unexamined normative claims, and opaque ideological assumptions that cry out for some philosophical examination. Drawing on a series of vivid examples from her own practice and the wider field—from analysing the slogans driving school-choice reforms, to exposing the assumptions embedded in appeals to "parental rights," to facilitating community dialogues on issues such as affirmative action and racial justice—she demonstrates the distinctive contribution and democratic merits of bringing the philosopher's skillset to bear on political discourse. Alongside providing powerful illustrations of this kind of philosophical work, Stitzlein uses these examples to reflect on the nature and purpose of public political philosophising. Pushing beyond Floyd, she argues that philosophy must work not only *in* and *for* the public—as Floyd contends—but also *with* them, issuing a call to reconceptualise "the public" not only as a consumer of philosophical interventions, but also—crucially—as their co-producer. Understood this way, such work promises not only clearer political discourse but the cultivation of democratic habits and political hope in a moment defined by culture wars, misinformation, and declining trust in public institutions.

Wendy Brown's contribution takes up and extends this line of argument. To do so, she shifts the scene from contemporary public discourse to the politics of classical Athens, and the public role performed by arguably the greatest of the classical philosophers: Socrates. In contrast to both the Sophists' didactic lectures and today's theory-first, practice-later models of "applied" philosophy, Socratic practice—says Brown—was not intended to supply philosophical answers to political problems, but directed instead towards posing good questions. At its centre was the dialogic exchange: a back-and-forth inquiry that aimed to expose unexamined assumptions, clarify concepts, and scrutinise the attachments shaping normative judgements. The crucial value of this philosophical-pedagogic practice, Brown argues, lay in the transformative effect it had on Socrates's interlocutors, reshaping them at the levels of thought, affect, and conduct. In transforming individual citizens in this way, Socrates's approach had the potential to remake the polity as a whole, nurturing a democratic political culture capable of challenging the corrupted politics of his time. Turning to our own, Brown thus highlights the importance of this kind of cultivation in an era marked by rising authoritarianism and fascism.

One marked feature of Brown's account is the way it captures the subversive, even radical undercurrents to the Socratic dialogue. Part of the power of the dialogic form, she notes, lies in its capacity to push its participants into a vertiginous vantage point beyond the settled certainties of their own time. In that space, assumptions that ordinarily pass as common sense are rendered unfamiliar; inherited hierarchies lose their naturalness; and the sentimental bonds that tether individuals to dominant norms become available for scrutiny. For

14 Swift 2025, 51–58; see also Patberg et al. 2025.

15 Floyd 2025, 323–27.

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Brown, this is precisely the kind of shift in perspective that democratic life requires: a civic capacity to step outside the given and familiar, recognise when authority is corrupt or exclusionary, and imagine political alternatives. And to achieve this, she argues, Socrates adopted the position of a self-anointed nuisance—or, in his own memorable phrase, "gadfly"—that could be both profoundly irritating and profoundly challenging to those whose authority rested on a lack of questioning.

That subversive dimension stands in contrast to the more peaceable and consensus-oriented approaches presented by Floyd, Stitzlein, and others. In that vein, more than one contemporary author has cast the public political philosopher as a kind of civic emergency service or firefighter: someone who steps in to douse the flames of public confusion, cool overheated disagreements, and restore the conditions for reasonable deliberation in fractious times.[16] Brown's Socrates, by contrast, is something of an arsonist, deliberately cultivating the friction, disturbance, and self-interrogation required—she argues—for a more robust democratic renewal.

Echoing Brown's line of argument, Lawrence Hamilton's contribution also adopts the Socratic image of the gadfly to capture what he claims is the indispensable task of critique at the heart of public political philosophising. Drawing on another example—this time, the political thought of the South African academic and anti-apartheid activist, Rick Turner—Hamilton calls for a fundamental shift in what Turner termed the "*theoretical attitude.*"[17] Rather than imagining themselves as the sorts of policy advisers or technical experts fostered by the modern neoliberal university, public political philosophers—says Hamilton—should be cage-rattlers, irreverently interrogating the commonsensical ideas, inherited certainties, and canonised values that organise our present political moment. To accomplish this, Hamilton proposes a method composed of two forms of theorising that seem, on the surface, antithetical: a realist focus on the historical present, and a utopian exploration of a potential future. Building on Turner, he fuses these into what he calls a "realist utopianism," combining a realist analysis of how the world came to be as it is with a utopian imagination of the alternative ways it might be. This approach, he argues, offers a vantage point from which the theorist can grasp the present as *already history*—and therefore open to transformation—and the future as a terrain of *alternative possible presents*—and therefore available as a space of political possibility, and even hope. With this reoriented theoretical attitude in hand, Hamilton turns to its practical implications: public political philosophy must, he argues, privilege democratic persuasion over policy prescription, openness and accessibility over expertise gated behind paywalls, and direct engagement with citizens as partners in democratic judgement rather than service to policy elites.

2. Letting the public in

The second theme turns our attention from the outputs of philosophical practice to its inputs. Historically, those inputs have scarcely involved the public. Political philosophers (or anglophone analytical ones at least) have largely limited their methods to reasoning from abstract principles, consulting their intuitions, constructing hypothetical thought experiments, and debating one another rather than engaging in any sustained or systematic way with what members of the public actually think.[18] That insularity, however, is increasingly questioned. On one front, political philosophers have recognised that if their work is to

16 De Shalit 2020, 10–11; Wolff 2011, 196.

17 For discussion, see Turner 1968.

18 De Shalit 2020.

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have any real practical efficacy, then it must cater to the problems, needs, and circumstances of real political actors.[19] On another, empirical sensitivity (of one kind or another) has come to be seen as essential to good political philosophising, in the sense that the quality of philosophical reasoning itself is improved when it works with more realistic, better-verified pictures of the social world.[20] Together, the result has been an explosion of new methods intended to meet the subject's growing practical and empirical ambitions.

However, beneath that roughly shared ambition lies a great deal of variation. For some, all that is required is a modest empirical vigilance, largely limited to checking the factual assumptions underpinning philosophical arguments to avoid outright empirical error. Others though have called for a wider overhaul of philosophical practice in which its questions, principles, and modes of reasoning are brought into alignment with the public. Between these two poles, there is a rapidly expanding and hugely heterogeneous field of approaches that seek, in different ways, to integrate empirical insights into philosophical argument, experiment with participatory approaches, or attune normative inquiry to public concerns and attitudes.[21]

It is in that spirit that Lena Halldenius and Moa Petersén's contribution makes a case for "*philosophical fieldwork*": a method that, they tell us, brings a distinctive form of ethnographic inquiry into the heart of public political philosophy. Drawing on their research into the harms of digital exclusion in Sweden, they issue a challenge to traditional philosophical methods that attempt to examine the demands of justice through abstract principles formulated at a distance. Such approaches, they say, inevitably marginalise the experiences of those bearing the brunt of real-world injustices. This not only constitutes its own form of injustice (what philosophers call an "epistemic injustice") but also produces selective, idealised pictures of social life that obscure many of its normatively significant dimensions.[22] Philosophical fieldwork is thus offered as a tool to correct these epistemic injustices and limitations: rather than treating lived experience as merely the sociological background or field of application for abstract philosophical principles, they insist that the perceptions, interpretations, and practical reasoning of those who suffer injustices must inform normative theorising from the ground up.

In practice, this means embracing what Lisa Herzog and Bernardo Zacka call an "ethnographic sensibility," though—say Halldenius and Petersén—without the kind of long-term immersion associated with classical ethnographic participant observation.[23] Instead, their approach draws on detailed qualitative interviews as a way of accessing the perceptions, ideas, and ascriptions of meaning that structure the everyday lives of those experiencing injustices. Highlighting the value of this kind of rigorous empirical work, Halldenius and Petersén describe how their own fieldwork upturned their understanding of the harms of digital exclusion, in that what initially appeared as a problem of unequal access to technology revealed itself as a process that actively *constructs* incapacity, before then stigmatising the excluded as unwilling or inept. Their concluding lesson is that normative theories that fail to engage seriously with lived experience risk reproducing the very invisibilities that injustice creates.

19 Wolff 2011, 3–10.
20 Ackerly et al. 2021; Perez 2025.
21 For an overview, see Floyd 2022.
22 Fricker 2007.
23 Herzog and Zacka 2019.

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Alice Baderin's contribution echoes that lesson but adds an important note of caution. She does so through what is, at first glance, a counter-intuitive claim: that despite appearances, the twin impulses of publicly minded political philosophers—on the one hand, the turn toward empirical social science, on the other, the ambition to have public impact—do not necessarily reinforce or coincide with one another, and might even work at cross-purposes. One tension concerns the *distinctiveness* of political philosophy: there is a danger that the more empirical evidence becomes centred in normative inquiry, the harder it becomes to explain what is distinctively philosophical about the endeavour, and the more it risks blurring into the social sciences. Another concerns the *complexity* of philosophical arguments. Whilst philosophers can certainly be guilty of inaccessibility, there are—says Baderin—certain communicative advantages to the intuitive, argumentative, imaginative kind of reasoning they tend to use, since this is in many ways continuous with the wider character of our civic discourse. Detailed empirical work, by contrast, can often pose steep barriers for non-specialist audiences.

Rather than advising philosophers to abandon either empirical sensitivity or public ambition, however, Baderin proposes a modestly public model of political philosophising that sidesteps both these problems. First, she argues that political philosophers can work *with* public beliefs as the raw normative material for philosophical reasoning, using existing views as its conceptual take-off points and exploring where those views might lead. Second, public attitudes can also guide philosophical agenda-setting, with philosophers orienting their normative inquiries towards issues that are publicly salient, rather than simply emerging from internal debates within the field or the introspections of individual philosophers. Showing the value of this approach, Baderin discusses her own research on risk and family relationships, highlighting how empirical evidence helped to uncover a previously overlooked racialised element to the dynamics of risk management within the family. On that basis, Baderin turns around her initial scepticism: empirical engagement, she concludes, is a vital part of public political theorising, enabling political philosophers to connect meaningfully with public opinion and the wider pattern of our civic discourse, and to identify the hidden normative contours of our social world that tend to be missed by armchair theorising.

Baderin models that empirical engagement on the familiar forms of data collection used across the social sciences. Likewise, Halldenius and Petersén draw on methods one would find in most of the methodological textbooks of that discipline—ethnography and qualitative interviewing—albeit adapted to the particular demands of normative theorising. In this respect, these three authors align with the mainstream methodological trends in the field, where the tendency has been to look to the empirical social sciences as a model for the kinds of empirical work that many want to make part of philosophical inquiry.

Some, though, are sceptical about this methodological borrowing. After all, even if one were convinced that political philosophers must incorporate empirical or pragmatic considerations into their theorising, one might still wonder whether the distinctive features of political philosophy—like its concern with normative prescription rather than factual description, emphasis on argument rather than observation, or aesthetic and affective dimensions—might mean traditional empirical methods do not really fit the bill. If so, what is needed is not merely a form of philosophy that incorporates the old empirical methods, but wholly novel philosophical-empirical methods tailored specifically to the demands of the discipline.

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Simon Stevens makes an argument of this kind. To do so, he draws on a distinctive approach to political philosophy—moral sentimentalism—and, more unexpectedly, on live-action role-play (LARP) as a method for public political philosophy. Where others present political philosophy as centred on the exchange of reasons and rational arguments, Stevens draws on moral sentimentalism to emphasise its affective dimension. To do so, he highlights that political practice sometimes throws up "wicked problems": problems that have no clear-cut normative or policy solution, and which cannot be fully resolved through standard methods of philosophical reasoning. Consequently, confronting them requires—says Stevens—not only the use of reason, but the right kind of affective register: specifically, not just sympathy (feeling sorry for someone else's situation), but *empathy* (being able to feel what they feel). Empathy enables us, he argues, to step into each other's shoes, expanding our imaginative and affective capacities so that we can discern the morally salient features of a situation that argument alone cannot reveal, as well as cultivating our ability to make the normative sacrifices and trade-offs required to confront wicked problems.

Empathy, however, requires its own method. Just as some methods are better or worse at prompting good philosophical reasoning, different methods put us in the right affective and imaginative circumstances to feel the right moral sentiments. But—as Stevens notes—many of the discipline's existing tools lack the rich, experiential quality required for this task, being (variously) too abstract, too occasional, too sanitised, or too detached from the pressures and practical dilemmas that shape real political experience. But LARP, by contrast, possesses what Stevens describes as the crucial quality of "immersion." By placing participants inside constructed but experientially rich scenarios, LARP allows them to think, act, and feel from within perspectives other than their own, generating what LARP theorists call "bleed": the affective and cognitive spillover between a player's in-game experiences and their real-world attitudes. Far from a defect, Stevens treats bleed as a form of sentimental education, cultivating dispositions—like humility, empathy, and attentiveness to complexity—necessary for engaging with wicked problems. He illustrates this with examples from pedagogical uses of role-play and LARP (or "eduLARP"), where immersive simulations have been shown to deepen understanding, widen moral imagination, and challenge entrenched assumptions.

3. Reason and beyond

Stevens's contribution opens some wider questions for aspiring public political philosophers. The predominant view in the field—and that has run through this introduction until now—is that at its heart, political philosophising is about *reasoning.* As such, debates about *public* political philosophising tend to centre around the wider public value (or potential value) of those reasoning practices. Stevens, though, says it's not about reasoning (or not *just* about reasoning), but about sentiments and affect. In doing so, his contribution reminds us that the precise meanings of the three terms that make up our title are hotly contested. This introduction is not the place to settle these debates (nor could it be). Instead, I highlight—in this third theme—how some publicly minded political philosophers have pushed at the edges of orthodox understandings of their discipline to come up with new, inventive ways of engaging with the public. Alongside Stevens, three further contributions to this issue help to bring this experimental horizon into view.

First, if most public political philosophers trade in arguments, and Stevens in sentiments, Jamie Doughty's contribution trades in spaces. Concerns about the statues and images that adorn our public spaces are widely recognised and hotly debated, pushed onto the agenda by movements like Rhodes Must Fall and made a part of the wider public consciousness by

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events like the dramatic dunking of Edward Colston's statue into Bristol harbour. But where most of the critical politics directed at these objects demand their removal, Doughty offers a different mode of engagement: one that, he says, retains the critical edge without so much of the iconoclasm. To do so, he turns to the hidden queer histories of our public statuary. By glimpsing these histories, says Doughty, we can reorient our experience of public space, transforming monuments from sites of exclusionary violence into something capable of generating a queer aesthetic ecstasy, thereby reimagining and reclaiming the spaces they occupy.

He illustrates this through a detailed exploration of a statue of Antinous—beloved of the Roman Emperor Hadrian, and later a homosexual icon for Victorian London—that stands above the portico at University College London. As Doughty highlights, reimagining the presence and significance of this statue is far from straightforward: much of its queer history is absent from the archive, and what historical record there is tends to be overwritten by a Victorian imperial imaginary that recoded his image into a symbol of masculine moral purity. To meet that challenge, Doughty turns to Saidiya Hartman's technique of "critical fabulation": a historically attentive but speculative mode of reconstruction that he uses to explore the queer possibilities and "might-have-beens" excluded from the archive, using these to craft new narratives that surface the hidden queer texture of historical events.[24] In the hands of the political philosopher—says Doughty—these fabulated histories can act not only as a way to resurrect concealed parts of our past but also to recognise what we lack in our present, and express what we desire for our future. In doing so, Doughty presents a mode of public political philosophising that radically departs from some of the standard frames, turning it instead into an aesthetic, imaginative, and historically rooted practice that uses queer fabulation to reclaim our public spaces from their inherited violence.

Second, where Doughty and Stevens drill down to explore the possibilities and benefits of specific new approaches, Olasov zooms out to give us a wider picture of the field, giving us a vantage point to explore, compare, and evaluate the variegated methods used by contemporary public political philosophers. His baseline for comparison is the fairly widespread practice of writing for a public audience. Offering a supportive critique of that practice, he identifies three problems: of academic overrepresentation (that this just adds to the existing overrepresentation of academics in political movements), concerning the critical intellectual (that philosophers tend to write critically, rather than present positive visions), and of novel values (that they usually appeal to values that are not widely recognised, or captured in standard metrics).

Wrangling with these problems, Olasov draws on a series of interviews conducted with political philosophers all working, in different ways, with the public, using these cases to outline and assess four further models: the organising model, where the philosopher becomes an active member of organisations that pursue political goals; the participatory model, where they create and facilitate spaces for political dialogue; the policy model, where they work up and promote specific policy proposals; and the aforementioned bureaucratic model, where they enter the government machinery at some level, be it as consultant, advisor, employee, or even elected representative. Olasov puts flesh to the bones of this typology by examining his rich case studies, including Marianne Garneau's participation as an organiser with the International Workers of the World, Michael Menser's contribution to the Participatory Budgeting Project in New York, Matt Bruenig's role as a think-tank

24 Hartman 2008.

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researcher for the People's Policy Project, and Margaret Betz's committee work on the Swarthmore Environmental Advisory Council. Moreover, alongside categorising and exemplifying these different approaches, Olasov considers how each of these models and cases responds to his three central problems. The result is a rich collage of the diverse forms of public engagement pursued by contemporary political philosophers; one that, in Olasov's hands, productively challenges and stretches some of the settled assumptions about what the public role of the political philosopher can be.

Our third boundary-pushing contribution comes from Guilherme Leite Gonçalves and Lena Lavinas. As I have already touched on, most mainstream discussions of public political philosophy treat "the public" as roughly equivalent to the people at large, framing the political philosopher as a neutral intellectual attempting to serve a generalised public interest, and doing so—most commonly—through some kind of consensus-building, or by facilitating democratic dialogue.[25] By contrast, Gonçalves and Lavinas begin their contribution by firmly identifying themselves as part of the left. Setting off on those terms, their article presents a strategic map for left politics centred on the challenges of confronting contemporary capitalism in Latin America. Exploring the case of Brazil and the influential work of the Brazilian Marxist philosopher and public intellectual Ruy Fausto, they discuss the challenges and opportunities facing the contemporary left in an era marked by financialisation, the erosion of class solidarities, and the failure of left politics to move beyond old state-centred political strategies.

To do so, Gonçalves and Lavinas draw on and revise Fausto's *Paths of the Left*.[26] Central to their argument is the contention that political philosophising is crucial if we are to overcome the inherited frames and concepts that, they argue, have increasingly held back the left political imagination. What is thus required is a concerted intellectual effort to invent new political categories, forge new political perspectives, and bring to the surface new strategic crossroads capable of sustaining a plurality of solidaristic bonds under radically altered social, economic, and cultural conditions in which the old-style of centralised class politics is no longer feasible. It is only with this renewed theoretical grip on contemporary capitalism, they argue, that any kind of leftist—or even postcapitalist—political horizon can come into view. Reading their contribution reminds us that political philosophers have often occupied central positions within political movements (perhaps especially so in radical ones), and that they have long written political pamphlets, manifestoes, and even slogans for banners as much as they have written journal articles or opinion pieces. The result is another strikingly different model for the public political philosopher: not a neutral mediator or civic facilitator, but a partisan strategist and agitator embedded in struggle and engaged in the hard strategic work of critique, rupture, and political re-composition.

4. Ivory towers and glass bungalows

Readers of this issue will probably be struck by both the opportunities and the challenges facing public political philosophy. Some of those challenges are straightforwardly practical: locating appropriate avenues for public engagement, speaking in the right ways to the right audiences about the right issues, "evidencing" your "impact," or simply finding the time. But as this introduction has highlighted, there are also deeper conceptual questions at stake

25 Floyd 2019; Swift 2025; Wolff 2011.

26 Fausto 2017.

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here, like concerns about the exercise's elitism, the overrepresentation of academic voices, the potential loss of philosophical distinctiveness, or the risk of turning detached philosophical rigour into a popularity contest.

I hope, though, that the contributions collected here persuade the reader that those challenges are surmountable, and far outweighed by the opportunities. For the political philosopher, going public—as it were—promises not just to give their work a wider relevance, but also a reform of the discipline itself, fostering forms of philosophical practice more attuned to lived experience, public concern, and democratic struggle; and perhaps a little less prone to the insularity that has often characterised academic political theory. And for the wider public, public political philosophy holds the potential to reshape our politics for the better, introducing new concepts, conversations, practices, affects, and even ways of being that might help to cultivate democratic resilience in our politically troubled times. I close, then, by returning to the remarks of my co-editor (the aforementioned Floyd), who suggests that public political philosophy can help revitalise democracy not by remaking our institutional *kratos*, but by renewing the *demos* itself: nurturing a public infused with sharper critical capacity, greater democratic confidence, deeper solidarities, and a renewed sense of political hope.[27]

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27 Floyd 2019, 12–13.

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