



# The View from Below: How the Neoliberal Academy Is Shaping Contemporary Political Theory

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## Abstract

Contemporary political theory is a game. Individuals compete to publish in ‘top’ journals, to amass greater numbers of publications than their peers; then journal-ranking is combined with number of publications generating scores. The aim is to get the most points. Whoever gets the most points wins: they get the best jobs and the most prestige. This *Hunger Games*-like contest has serious consequences for people’s lives, determining who can make a living from academia, who will be relegated to the academic precariat or forced out of the profession. In this article, I argue that, aside from the chilling effect that job insecurity and the gamification of academia has on the precariat, these conditions are stifling *intellectual* creativity, diversity, and dissent in political theory/philosophy. I discuss how privatization and deregulation of universities has created unbearable working conditions, why academics are forced to publish in so-called top journals and why this is detrimental to our field, marginalizing people, topics, and methodologies these journals do not support (which usually align with already structurally marginalized peoples and modes of knowledge). I explain why we are engaging in this game and how it perpetuates itself. I conclude with some suggestions for breaking this vicious cycle, as well as a discussion of who is really benefitting from it, namely, the corporate elites who run many universities and most academic publishers.

**Keywords** The neoliberal academy · Precarity · Decolonization · Top journals · Continental philosophy · Global South philosophy · Academic publishing · Political theory

*The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed, the world is ruled by little else.*

John Maynard Keynes

*Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.*

Karl Marx

Contemporary political theory is a game. Individuals compete to publish in ‘top’ journals, to amass greater numbers of publications than their peers; then journal-ranking is combined with number of publications generating scores. The aim is to get the most points. Whoever gets the most points wins: they get the best jobs and the most prestige. Successful players move to the next level where they compete for grants. Whoever brings in the most money wins, again in the form of jobs and prestige.

That political theory is a game is an open secret in the profession. Almost everyone has given up resisting and accepts the cards they have been dealt. They play by the rules, even though they resent them. At a time when bold new ideas and vision are needed for our crisis-laden world, a world that is literally on fire, political theorists are busying themselves with the game. No longer do they chafe against the political, social and economic status quo, nor the dominant philosophical and ideological ideas

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of the times, rather they chafe against “Reviewer #2”; the anonymous peer reviewer who trashes journal article submissions and stands in the way of publication.<sup>1</sup> As Peter Fleming puts it,

Careers and occupations have been thoroughly tied to the fetish of ‘top-tier’ journals, even among those who feel disadvantaged by the arrangement. . . . But one thing is patently obvious. That single-authored journal articles (trapped behind giant paywalls) are now considered the pinnacle of scholarly excellence indicates just how vanquished this workforce really is. (Fleming 2021: p. 12)

In terms of the type of game that political theory has become, it’s not a fun game; it’s more like *The Hunger Games*. Peers are competing in a brutal fight to the death, or at least the death of careers, sanity, and even physical health. This game has serious consequences for people’s lives. The ability to earn an income in academia depends on playing the game. And the game is rigged. It is much easier to play the game from the position of a permanent job with built-in research time. This luxury is increasingly the preserve of a select few — the tenured academics who make up a mere 30% of our profession. And, of course, the make-up of the secureitariat is depressingly white, male, able-bodied, middle/upper-class, and educated at a few elite Northern universities (Cherry and Schwitzgebel 2016; Matias et al. 2021). By contrast, the precariat is overloaded with women, people of colour, disabled, and working-class people (HESA 2021; Standing 2014).<sup>2</sup> The key to admission for the precariat into the secureitariat is to publish in a ‘top’ journal, but the longer a person stays in the precariat, the more the odds are stacked against them, as their time is taken up with constantly new teaching, relocating, the endless job search, and the emotional, psychological, and sometimes physical toll from all of the

<sup>1</sup> It’s not just that the proverbial reviewer 2 rejects a person’s submission on which their chances at getting a secure job, promotion, or even their whole career depends, it’s that the reviewer does so with gleeful vengeance and cruel comments, probably only having skim-read the article. Reviewer 2 is aptly described in this article as ‘the heartless bastard who keeps trying to torpedo the careers of other academics’ (Timmer 2020). Gill provides some comments from real peer review reports including ‘this is self-indulgent crap’ and ‘put this manuscript in a drawer and do not ever bother to come back to it’ (Gill 2010: p. 14). When a person has spent months, and even years, working on their manuscript, such comments can be devastating. The internet is awash with reviewer 2 memes and jokes, demonstrating the psychic power of reviewer 2 over the profession. It’s not clear what produces this kind of behaviour in anonymous academics, but Gill attributes it to ‘the peculiarly toxic conditions of neoliberal academia.’

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘precariat’ was coined by Guy Standing to describe a new class of workers created by the global market economy. Characteristics of the precariat include distinct relations of production (flexible contracts, temporary jobs, working for agencies); distinct relations of distribution (no non-wage benefits like pensions and sick pay); and distinct relations to the state (a lack of basic socio-economic rights) (Standing 2014). I am using ‘secureitariat’ to depict its opposite in the context of academia, those with permanent and secure jobs.

above. Some will be caring for dependents or managing disabilities or medical conditions on top of demands of the job. Finding the time and intellectual bandwidth to prepare a paper for a ‘top’ journal becomes more and more difficult the more embedded a person becomes in the precariat.

There is an obvious case to be made for the chilling effect of job insecurity on junior academics speaking out about poor working conditions and pay, workplace bullying, sexual harassment and abuse, and other issues that plague contemporary universities, but in this article, I want to make a case that job insecurity and the gamification of academia is stifling *intellectual* creativity, diversity, and dissent. The pressure to publish in ‘top’ journals means tailoring research to those journals. This edges out work that is different, disruptive, or otherwise unintelligible to the gatekeepers who police the upper echelons of the profession. The view from below reveals contemporary political theory to be in a state of simultaneous stasis and distress.<sup>3</sup> It is a shadow of what it can and should be. If Marx or Keynes were alive today, they would be shocked to see how far the profession has degenerated. No longer does it shape political systems and seek to change the world; most political theorists aspire to score more points to stay in the game, move to the next level, or outdo their peers.

## What Is the Neoliberal University?

Political theorists are not fond of the term ‘neoliberal’. It is derided as an empty signifier and a cliché. But neoliberalism is an identifiable set of economic and political policies, which have been applied across state institutions, including universities.<sup>4</sup> Neoliberalism is associated with privatization and deregulation; letting the market run public services in the name of efficiency, and governed by the supposedly incentivizing profit motive. In the university sector, it has included the removal of state funding from universities, to be replaced with privately paid fees (Moore 2021). This has generated a proliferation of degrees-for-profit, particularly Masters programmes (Weissmann 2021), and a bias toward

<sup>3</sup> By ‘the view from below’ I mean the view from the perspective of the academic precariat. The idea is loosely based on standpoint epistemology, that people can know things and reveal them to others, especially about oppression, from the vantage point of a particular social position. See (Hartsock 2019).

<sup>4</sup> The “Washington Consensus” was a phrase coined by John Williamson in a 1989 paper of that name. His aim was to identify a set of ten policies that would help indebted Latin American countries overcome their debt. These were fiscal discipline, reordering public expenditure priorities, tax reform, liberalizing interest rates, a competitive exchange rate, trade liberalization, liberalization of inward foreign direct investment, privatization, deregulation, and property rights. See (Williamson 2009). These policies were promoted with a specific purpose, but the overriding principles of privatization and deregulation have become embedded in governmental policy across the globe, particularly having been foisted on Global South countries by the IMF and World Bank through “structural adjustment programs”, but also in more economically liberal states like the US and UK. No sector has been untouched, including higher education.

business-oriented subjects such as STEM, business and finance, to the detriment of the Arts and Humanities, as getting a degree is now associated with getting a job (Ellen 2021). This has been felt particularly strongly in Philosophy, with the threatened closure of Philosophy departments so regular that the popular philosophy blog Daily Nous has a section entitled “Cuts and Threats to Philosophy Programs” (Daily Nous n.d.).

The proliferation of postgraduate degrees has led to intense competition on the academic job market, where hundreds of qualified applicants compete for increasingly few jobs. According to the US’s National Science Foundation data, only 19.4% of PhDs who graduated in 2011 got an academic job straight away (Weissmann 2013). The jobs themselves have been transformed from jobs-for-life into short, temporary contracts. In the US and UK, around 70% of teaching staff are on temporary contracts, often not covering the summer months and without benefits like sick pay or pensions contributions ((UCU), 2021; Flaherty 2019). The ‘adjunct underclass’ is struggling to make ends meet; in the most extreme cases, adjuncts in the US and UK are experiencing homelessness and early death (Fazackerley 2021; Harris 2019; Kilgannon 2014). In Japan, 62% of adjuncts are over-40, and they are earning on average US\$13,600 per year, meaning they are classified as ‘working poor’ (Kimie 2021).

Academics with permanent jobs have also been deeply affected by the neoliberalization of universities. The neoliberal university can be defined as ‘a polity whose hard managerialism systematically deconstructs the space through which professional autonomy is exercised. This is achieved via the imposition of performance targets, performance criteria and homogenised systems for assessing research and teaching performance’ (Erickson et al. 2021: 2135). This managerial culture and loss of workplace autonomy is contributing to a tsunami of mental health problems in the academy (Fazackerley 2019). UK academics with permanent jobs face the ever-looming spectre of the REF (Research Excellence Framework, which demands a certain amount of publications per academic every five years) and TEF (Teaching Excellence Framework, which monitors academics’ teaching and evaluates it based on student review). The REF in particular is the be all and end all of UK academia. As Marina Warner puts it, ‘Everyone in academia had come to learn that the REF is the currency of value. A scholar whose works are left out of the tally is marked for assisted dying’ (Warner 2014). Even though there are permanent academic jobs in the UK, they are performance-dependent (read REF-dependent), so these staff can be made redundant. According to a widely cited paper by Roger Burrows, UK academics are measured on up

to 100 different nested scales (Burrows 2012: p. 359), making them ‘one of the most surveilled groups in history’ (Erickson et al. 2021: p. 2136).<sup>5</sup> Working conditions are also being eroded. In the UK, there is an ongoing fight over staff pensions; universities want to remove guaranteed pensions and make them performance-dependent ((UCU), 2021). In the US, tenure is being eroded; it has already disappeared from most community colleges; it is being undermined in state universities, and will likely only remain for the select few at Ivy League institutions (Warner 2018). In Europe, autonomy and working conditions are also facing threats (Castellacci and Viñas-Bardolet 2021).

To the extent that universities still receive state funding, they rely on external measures of scholarly importance and worth. In the UK, 25 percent of government funding is linked to ‘impact’, which means universities must have “an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia.”<sup>6</sup> Having impact outside of the academy is not a bad thing in itself. In fact, that was precisely Marx’s point — the aim should be to change the world — and many political theorists and philosophers have followed in his footsteps. But in many cases the precise meaning of “impact” has been reduced to economic impact. As Peter Fleming puts it, “the economy” is considered the sole arbiter of social worth, a master signifier that transcends all other values. We can no longer speak about some part of society, be it culture, morality, education or leisure without mentioning its positive or negative impact on growth and prosperity’ (Fleming 2021, p. 101). This is more baldly stated in the American Association of Universities’ definition of impact: “universities serve as economic engines for their communities and regions.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, even though political theorists and philosophers research issues that are of utmost societal importance, and many seek to make an impact beyond the ivory tower, this is not reflected in the current impact agenda. As Fleming puts it, ‘when it comes to arguments about the desirability of free markets, animal testing and who should live or die when a pandemic lays civilisation low, philosophical thought is essential. The current impact agenda registers none of this’ (Fleming 2021, p. 107). Philosophy’s lack of ‘impact’ accounts for its sense of constant threat and besiegement.

The tethering of impact to economic growth forces universities to engage with business and industry, which is often irrelevant to political theorists and philosophers. But like all academics, political theorists and philosophers ‘must demonstrate... practical worth to an organisation (or ‘Employee Corporate Value Proposition’) in order to be counted as a

<sup>5</sup> Abolishing the REF might appear to be the solution to this problem. But the worry is that it could be replaced by something even worse. The REF at least includes a peer review process that gives some leeway for work to be recognized that does not fit the established metrics, which a purely quantitative metric would not do. Thanks to Cécile Laborde for this point.

<sup>6</sup> “Economic Impact” and Research England (2019) “REF Impact” quoted in (Fleming 2021: pp. 100–101)

<sup>7</sup> American Association of Universities (2019) quoted in (Fleming 2021: p. 101)

valuable member of its community’ (Fleming 2021: 109). Some philosophers and philosophy departments are exploring this option. For instance, Oxford offers an undergraduate degree in Computer Science and Philosophy, and Cambridge recently launched its Centre for the Future of Intelligence with links to Google’s Deep Mind and PricewaterhouseCoopers. But most philosophers tend to measure impact and demonstrate their worth to the managerial class in terms of publications in ‘top’ journals and bringing in grant money. Therefore, even though the academic game already existed, the neoliberal academy has forced it into overdrive. Academics, both tenured and non-tenured, are desperate to prove their worth in this hyper-surveilled and corporate culture and they do this through publications, specifically, publications in ‘top’ journals.

### The Problem with ‘Top’ Journals

Many academics have become so used to the mantra “publish or perish,” or more accurately “publish in ‘top’ journals or perish,” that they believe in it. Even those who do not believe still play the game because they know they must in order to survive in the profession. The “myth of merit” is pervasive in academia, especially in philosophy which is associated with “innate talent” (Leslie et al. 2015; Zheng 2018).<sup>8</sup> Since this belief is so deeply ingrained, I suspect both camps, even the sceptical, will be thinking the following: What’s wrong with tailoring research to publish in top-tier journals? Don’t they guarantee high standards of scholarship?

In 2018, Brian Leiter of “The Leiter Report,” an influential philosophy blog, conducted a poll of moral and political philosophers to determine the most influential journals in the field.<sup>9</sup> The basis of the poll was ‘something that promotion and tenure committees could point to’ (Leiter 2018b). Three hundred and ten moral and political philosophers voted. According to this poll, the five most important and prestigious moral and political philosophy journals are *Ethics*, *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, *Journal of Political Philosophy*, *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, and *Utilitas* (Leiter 2018a).

<sup>8</sup> See also Iris Marion Young’s classic critique of the myth of merit in relation to affirmative action, Chapter 7 of (Young 1990).

<sup>9</sup> There is an issue here about disciplinary boundaries. In the UK, which is the academic context I am most familiar with, there is not a sharp distinction between political theory and political philosophy, and people working in these fields can work in both Politics and Philosophy departments. In the US, there is a sharper distinction with political theorists working in Politics departments and political philosophers working in Philosophy departments. I consider myself a political theorist and I now work in an interdisciplinary faculty on the political science track, but for the previous two years I worked in a Philosophy faculty. So to me, the boundaries are blurred, but readers in the US might find the fluidity and interchangeability of the way I use the terms political theory and philosophy jarring.

A cursory glance at this list shows that Anglo-American normative analytic philosophy is by far the dominant methodology and ideological framework adopted by the ‘top’ journals.<sup>10</sup> In practice, the ‘top’ journals legitimate mainstream research as the pinnacle of the profession, squeezing out non-mainstream moral or political philosophy. Work in other areas is siloed into specialist journals and considered niche, famously feminism. Some previously neglected *topics* are permitted in these journals, such as feminism, critical race theory or specific Continental philosophers, or philosophers from Global South countries or engaging with philosophies deriving from the Global South, but only if the author uses the correct *methodology*, i.e. the analytic method. Of the top 25 journals, only one routinely publishes Continental approaches — *Political Theory*, number 19 on the list. If Continental political theorists/philosophers want to get published in ‘top’ journals, they must do so using the analytic method.<sup>11</sup> As Mike Lewis writes, ‘continental philosophy has become subject to criteria of acceptability that means that only a very watered down or trendy form can survive... the analytic hegemony is partly responsible for that. They want continental philosophers who can either make themselves intelligible to them, or who are so obviously woolly... that they are no threat to them.’<sup>12</sup> None of the journals specialize in Global South approaches. None specialize in feminism. The effect of this is that anyone researching outside the mainstream will be excluded from the ‘top’ journals by default, hindering their chances of getting (or in some cases keeping) a job.

Since it is difficult to get published in ‘top’ journals when working on anything but Anglo-American normative analytic philosophy, making it difficult for political theorists working outside of this area to get hired, the practice of valorizing ‘top’

<sup>10</sup> I would describe normative analytic Anglo-American political philosophy as ideological on a number of grounds. First, it is predominantly (though not exclusively) associated with liberalism. Second, in focusing on normative responses to politics, it excludes descriptive critical responses like historical materialism, discourse analysis and psychoanalytic approaches, among others. Third, it almost exclusively engages in ‘conceptual analysis’, which is a narrow pursuit and for the most part ignores structural forces, focusing instead on linguistic analysis of specific concepts. Fourth, it is predominantly concerned with the individual, be it individual freedom or equality, individual action, responsibility, knowledge, or selfhood. All of this serves to bolster the status quo ideology of the times, which is (neo)liberalism.

<sup>11</sup> The Continental/Analytic philosophy distinction is a broad-brush and contested distinction. Broadly speaking, analytic philosophers are inspired by mostly English and American philosophers, such as Quine and Russell, they focus on objectivity, formal logic, ‘mind’, language, and conceptual analysis. Continental philosophers are inspired by philosophers from mainland Europe, such as Hegel and Marx, and more recently Foucault, Derrida and Deleuze. They cover a range of philosophical schools of thought including, but not limited to, phenomenology, existentialism, post-structuralism, psychoanalytic theory, and critical theory.

<sup>12</sup> Personal correspondence on file with author. I emailed Mike Lewis as the Head of Department of one of the few remaining Continental Philosophy departments in the UK to ask for his views on the marginalization of his field. The same sentiment is echoed by Babette Babich in the following interview, (Bateman and Babich 2016).

journal publications above all else is narrowing the scope of the field. The effects of this narrowing of the field are clear to see. Continental philosophy is now almost eliminated from UK universities. With the demise of the Middlesex philosophy department, the only remaining Continental philosophy specialist departments in the UK are Dundee, Kingston, and Newcastle. Part of this has to do with the REF. Scholars demonstrate their worth in the terms laid out by the REF by publishing in high-ranking, high-impact journals. Since the high-ranking, high-impact journals are Anglo-American analytic journals, it is hard for Continental philosophers to demonstrate their worth on this metric. Therefore, when hiring committees decide who will contribute most to the department in terms of performance in the REF, an analytic philosopher is at a distinct advantage, because for the hiring committee and managerial overseers the quantitative metric is a supposedly neutral indicator of a scholar's value.

In the US, Ivy League philosophy departments are solidly analytic, with Continental philosophy relegated to state universities. However, even if Continental philosophy has been relegated, at least there is provision in this field: The Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy lists 46 Philosophy departments in the US with Ph.D. programmes that are 'interested in, supportive of, or specializing in continental philosophy' (Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy n.d.). The same cannot be said for Global South philosophy or political theory. While there has been an increase in universities offering non-Western philosophy, these offerings are still vanishingly small. Out of the 118 Philosophy departments offering Ph.Ds in the US, only 10 percent have a faculty member specializing in Chinese philosophy and many have no courses on Africana, Indian, Islamic, Jewish, Latin American or Indigenous philosophies (Garfield and Norden 2016). Of the top 50 doctoral programmes, only 15 percent have a faculty member specializing in any form of non-Western philosophy (Garfield and Norden 2016).

Despite these dismal figures, there has been an increase in scholarship and education in these areas, yet this is not reflected in the 'top' journals. Amy Olberding surveyed what she calls 'general' philosophy journals.<sup>13</sup> Included in her analysis were three of Leiter's top 5 moral and political philosophy journals. Between 1939 and 2014, *Ethics* published 2 articles in Asian philosophies out of a total of 2132 articles. Between 1971 and 2013, *Philosophy & Public Affairs* published zero articles in Asian philosophies out of 625 articles. From 2004 to 2014, *The Journal of Moral Philosophy* published 1 out of 261. As Olberding convincingly concludes, 'the *de facto* exclusion of work that substantively engages Asian philosophies

<sup>13</sup> Meaning 'journals that are either pitched as canvassing *philosophy*, absent any qualifiers about what philosophy may be included, or are pitched as canvassing some *general philosophical domain*, such as ethics or history' (Olberding 2016: 3).

does not simply keep work in these areas marginalized, but keeps philosophy itself constricted, both in its membership and in its intellectual scope' (Olberding 2016: 7).<sup>14</sup>

As Jay Garfield and Bryan Van Norden argue 'No other humanities discipline demonstrates this systematic neglect of most of the civilizations in its domain. The present situation is hard to justify morally, politically, epistemically or as good educational and research training practice' (Garfield and Norden 2016). The narrowness of philosophy leads Garfield and Van Norden to argue that philosophy departments should be re-branded as "American and European Philosophy". John Drabinski suggests "Department of White Western philosophy"; the national *and* racial dimensions should be specified, because not everyone in the 'West' is White (Drabinski 2016).

Women are also being excluded from these journals. Women account for 25% of the philosophy profession, but only for 14–16% of publications in Leiter's top 25 philosophy journals (Wilhelm et al. 2018). As the authors of this study on the representation of women in philosophy journals between 2004 and 2015 put it, 'The underrepresentation of women in philosophy journals is significant because of the role that academic publishing plays in hiring and tenuring practices. If women are not getting published, then they are most likely at a disadvantage compared to their male counterparts when it comes to gaining and maintaining academic jobs' (Wilhelm et al. 2018: 1460). Feminist philosophy is woefully underrepresented in these journals. Sally Haslanger found that between 2002 and 2007, 2.86% of the articles published in *Ethics* were on feminist philosophy and 5.13% in *Philosophy & Public Affairs* (Haslanger 2008: 220). Some of this is down to ideological and cultural biases in the profession where philosophy is perceived as 'hyperrational, objective, and masculine' with feminist philosophy coded as 'emotional, political, and non-objective' (Haslanger 2008: 216).<sup>15</sup>

Another dimension that leads to the narrowing of the field is language. English is the only game in town when it comes to the leading philosophy journals. In an empirical survey of the 'Top Philosophy Journals Without Regard to Area' from the Leiter Report in 2013, and surveyed in 2016, it was found that of the 3556 citations in original articles, 97% were from a source

<sup>14</sup> In case you think the problem here is that Asian philosophies tend to engage with Ancient thinkers rather than contemporary problems, Olberding compares the number of articles 'invoking and employing' Aristotle compared to those invoking and employing Asian philosophies. *Ethics* had 28 such articles, *Journal of Moral Philosophy* had 6 and *PPA* 2. She writes, 'There is, *by an order of magnitude*, more work available in general audience journals on but *one* ancient Greek philosopher than there is on Asian philosophy in its totality, a totality that represents *hundreds* of philosophers spanning *thousands* of years and *multiple* cultural sites and traditions of inquiry.' (p. 5)

<sup>15</sup> Haslanger points out that she did not have the data on numbers of submissions of works in feminist philosophy to these journals. But if the problem is that people are not submitting feminist philosophy to these journals, this raises the question of why? Presumably it has something to do with the historical and ongoing exclusion of this field in these journals. Why submit, if you know it will be rejected?

originally written in English. Twelve percent cited one non-Anglophone work and 15% cited at least two, but the only other source languages were Ancient Greek, Latin, German, French and Italian (Schwitzgebel et al. 2018: 26). The authors also found that 96% of members of editorial boards of top journals live in majority-Anglophone countries (Schwitzgebel et al. 2018: 28). The authors do not engage in a normative discussion of these findings, but they do venture that Anglophone philosophy is guilty of insularity, an asymmetrical influence over the field, and language dominance (Schwitzgebel et al. 2018: 22–23). We can extrapolate from this that native English-speakers are at an advantage in terms of publishing in top journals, which results in jobs and prestige, while speakers of other languages must learn English to a proficient level before they can even participate in the field. Moreover, Anglophone philosophers are not engaging with non-Anglophone philosophy, which could partially account for the marginalization of all other areas of philosophy, including Continental philosophy, and Global South philosophies.

The obvious objection from a broadly analytic/liberal perspective at this point will be something along the following lines: “There is a marketplace of ideas where the good ideas win, and the inferior ones die out. If these other philosophical traditions are dying out, then they simply weren’t good enough. The end.” However, when the ideas that dominate the discipline all emanate from one geographical locale, and for the most part one racial group, and that locale happens to be the ‘West’ (specifically the Anglophone West), the racial group White people, and more often than not men, then this should give pause for thought. It is well-established that part of the process of colonization included the destruction of non-Western modes of thought, which were considered ‘primitive’ or ‘uncivilized.’ Of course, non-Western modes of thought were neither of these things, they were just different. But this colonial bias remains deep-seated. And, shockingly, it is perpetuated in the supposed outlets of the pinnacle of philosophical thought today.

As Lewis Gordon argues, prior to European imperialism, there were disparate modes of knowledge; there were knowledges (Gordon 2011: 95). Unification of knowledges into knowledge was due to the processes of imperial realignment. In philosophy, colonization occurred at the methodological level. Rationality, which is based on logic, has become equated with reason, but ‘the scope of reason exceeds rationality’ (Gordon 2011: 97). Reasoning does not have to be based on rationality alone; it can also be based on context, lived experience, and different cultural or religious frameworks. Reasoning can accommodate contradictions and complexity. There is nothing inherent about reasoning that tethers it to logical consistency: ‘The project of much modern European philosophical thought, however, has been the effort to cultivate such a marriage. Toward such a goal, the instruments of rationality are often unleashed with the result of the effort to yoke reason to

rationality. This effort could be reformulated as the effort to colonize reason’ (Gordon 2011: 98). Gordon suggests that the obsession with method is a form of ‘disciplinary decadence’; being “right” is a matter of applying the method correctly, letting all other considerations fall by the wayside, and turning the discipline in on itself.

There is much talk about decolonising philosophy/political theory and universities more generally. But decolonization goes much deeper than tacking on a few racialized and Global South thinkers to predominantly White and Global North syllabi. It should amount to a wholesale rethink of what constitutes philosophy/political theory. It is not the case that only Anglo-American normative analytic philosophy has the answers to the philosophical questions that underlie politics in the past or present. There are multiple ways of reasoning about these problems from all philosophical traditions. Many varieties of political systems and societies existed prior to the American-European tradition of liberal democracies. Some still do (even if some of these are colonized). What can these traditions tell us about the philosophy of politics both in the past and today? One of the most innovative areas in this respect for our current moment of crisis is Indigenous political philosophy, with its emphasis on the fundamental integration of humans with other animals and the earth.

I do not think this implies that analytic philosophy must be abandoned as a framework for doing political theory/philosophy. But I do think it highlights that the discipline should be more self-aware about what it is doing. Putting the analytic method on a pedestal is to put the colonial method on a pedestal. It means that people who have an affinity with the colonial method are rewarded materially in terms of jobs and prestige, and that they shape the intellectual contours of the discipline. Others are left out in the cold. If they want to come in, they must bow to the pressure and work within ‘the’ methodology to publish in the ‘top’ journals.

## Why Are We Playing This Game?

If the goal of publishing in ‘top’ journals is so detrimental to the intellectual and material diversity of political theory and philosophy, why have academics narrowed their ambitions in this way? It is easy to be snifty and to attribute this to mere careerism (and in some cases I suspect it is to do with that), but more significantly, the problem is structural.

For junior scholars, the incentive to publish in ‘top’ journals is clear: it is the only way to get a permanent job and, in some cases, it is required even for temporary jobs. Junior scholars have immense demands on their time. Let us play one of the favourite analytic philosopher’s games and have a thought experiment. Sophia is a 30-year-old woman with a Ph.D. in Political Theory from a mid-ranking university. She is working in the UK on teaching-only contracts and is paid per module.

Over the course of one academic year, she works at three different universities, and over the summer she works in a bar. She is teaching new content each semester, which entails lots of preparation, which is unpaid. On top of that, she is constantly applying for more work. She is commuting to two different cities for university work. The previous year she worked in another country on a research postdoc. She is still paying off the costs of the move abroad because the university only paid relocation expenses for new tenure-track staff. She is currently living at her girlfriend's (much to the disdain of the girlfriend's flatmates) while she is looking for somewhere more settled to rent that she can afford on her salary and is within commuting distance to her current university jobs. Sophia's research time is extremely limited. She tries to research after 8 pm at night, when she has finished her teaching work, and on Sundays (on Saturdays she is preparing teaching). Her girlfriend is getting increasingly annoyed that she spends hardly any time with her. Given the limited window for research, the pressure of the job market, and the need to publish as quickly as possible, she decides to focus all of her energy on getting a publication in *Ethics* or *Philosophy & Public Affairs*. Sophia has critical theory roots and spent time studying in Germany, but she thinks that getting a publication in one of these journals will enable her to secure a permanent position in the UK, giving her the stability, research time, and time for a personal life, that she so craves.

Sophia's strategy might not pay off. Her article could easily be rejected from these journals with a swift desk reject or a bruising peer review report by someone who barely knows her research topic. Even if she does get a publication in one of these journals, it does not *guarantee* a permanent job; it merely moves her CV up the pile. When she is competing with the Ph.D. students of people on hiring committees, or the friends of people on hiring committees, or internal candidates, it will probably not matter at all, because the reality of the academic job market, for all we are told it is about quantitative metrics, is that nepotism is still very much alive. O'Donnell and Sadlier suggest that becoming a faculty member is like becoming a member of a secret society; it involves 'knowing who to know and knowing the codes of what goes said and unsaid' (O'Donnell and Sadlier 2021). Prejudice and snobbery when it comes to where a candidate was educated are also rife; someone with a Ph.D. from a 'better' university (i.e. Oxbridge or the Ivy League) has a statistically much better chance of securing a job than Sophia (Warner and Clauset 2015). And, of course, there are the well-established barriers of structural sexism, racism, ableism, homo- and transphobia that affect all individuals from these social groups. But whatever the outcomes of Sophia's attempt to secure a job, her approach is rational — it is about the only thing she can do to have a chance on the job market.

## A Self-Perpetuating Cycle

If Anglo-American analytic political philosophy is presumed to *be* political philosophy, then this is what is taught in universities. Its students go on to do Ph.Ds. In order to get jobs, they must publish in 'top' journals, so even if they do not want to, they do research and publish using this methodology and set of (White, Anglophone, Northern, and mostly male) interlocutors. Because they have no discretionary time, they teach the next generation of students in the mode they have been taught and based on the research that they are doing, informing them that this *is* political philosophy.

When getting hired in universities depends on publishing in 'top' journals, and 'top' journals systematically exclude anything but the dominant analytic methodology, then it does not pay to spend one's time working within other philosophical and theoretical frameworks. It might pay in terms of self- and intellectual-fulfilment, or fulfil a public good of the preservation of modes of thought and culture that have been colonized and displaced, as well as in terms of broadening the horizons of political theory as a discipline, but it will not pay the bills. Nor will it secure academic prestige and permanent employment. As Olberding puts it with regard to Asian philosophy, 'the discipline effectively creates significant professional disincentives for newer, younger philosophers to take up any active interest in Asian philosophy. Moreover, those whose interests are unshakeable may, and certainly sometimes do, simply go elsewhere – to area studies programs, to religious studies' (Olberding 2016: 8). And the issue here is not just about *who* is doing political philosophy (although that is vital), it is about *what counts* as philosophy. As Olberding continues: 'Apart from issues regarding membership and success in the profession, however, is trouble I think ought concern us even more: the ways in which professional practices influence the intellectual contours of the discipline itself.' As Mike Lewis argues,

continental philosophy *is* philosophy, it addresses in a classical way classical problems. Continental philosophy in fact deals with the most traditional questions that the tradition raises, and that first emerged in Greece: like the principles of thought and being, from the principle of identity to the principle of non-contradiction and the principle of sufficient reason. The way it tries to think about them becomes particularly clear in Hegel and in phenomenology in the modern sense, the 20<sup>th</sup> Century sense: it refuses to think about these issues using categories (concepts/words) that have already been decided upon, or are already given. Only up to a certain point does analytic philosophy do that; and the latter corpus is much smaller, so I think it should have a smaller proportion of the faculty and occupy a smaller part of the

curriculum.<sup>16</sup>

The costs of the narrowing of the field are significant. It is stifling intellectual creativity and dissent, breeding myopia and mediocrity. As Stephen Buranyi puts it with regard to science, ‘These days, given a choice of projects, a scientist will almost always reject both the prosaic work of confirming or disproving past studies, and the decades-long pursuit of a risky “moonshot”, in favour of a middle ground: a topic that is popular with editors and likely to yield regular publications’ (Buranyi 2017). The same can be said of political theory/philosophy. Rather than aiming for genuinely original and ground-breaking ideas, political theorists aim to spot and fill a gap in the Anglo-American analytic literature. That is the best strategy for publication, but it is not a likely strategy for intellectual innovation. Genuine insight and disruption are shot down in flames by peer reviewers, who police the boundaries of the discipline. Even if creative and disruptive ideas make it past the peer review process, they can be rejected by editors or editorial boards who want to maintain the brand of the journal or who reject challenge and change to their established way of doing things. Getting published can amount to pleasing as many people as possible who operate within the dominant analytic methodology. People-pleasing is not a recipe for creativity and dissent.

There is also a cost to intellectual diversity. Olberding writes with regard to Asian philosophies:

Insofar as journals symbolically and materially measure what the profession counts as important, the absence of Asian philosophies from the profession’s high readership general audience journals implicitly communicates something. At best, we risk suggestion that the philosophies of Asia are simply unimportant, uninteresting, or unconvincing relative to what does appear in the journals – relative, that is, to philosophy constructed within a more limited, distinctively Western canon. At worst, we risk suggesting that philosophy simply does not include Asian traditions, that what philosophy is operates on criteria Asian philosophies simply fail to meet. Most egregiously, any suggestions of this sort – that Asian philosophies are unimportant or that they are simply not philosophy proper – issue from ignorance: because Asian philosophies remain woefully underexposed in the discipline at large, the discipline has no sound basis on which to draw any conclusions regarding what they may offer. (Olberding 2016: p. 7)

At a time when we are supposed to be decolonizing the university, philosophy remains deeply colonized. I write this

when my own knowledge of non-Western forms of philosophy is superficial. That is because I was trained in the Western traditions and because I have spent the last six years rolling around on the waves of the academic job market, sometimes being completely submerged and most of the time just about keeping my head above water. Simply keeping up with the standard teaching and research requirements, and the job search, is a struggle. That is why I have tended to think it incumbent on permanent faculty to do the work of seriously decolonising political theory/philosophy. However, the reality is, as I addressed above, that even permanent faculty are floundering under the demands and pressures of the contemporary neoliberal academy. Permanent staff also must prove their worth by constantly publishing and achieving teaching ‘excellence’, and this usually translates into staying in their lane and not branching out into new territory. When overall working hours are tallied, academics in the UK are already doing two days a week of unpaid labour: an average of 50.9 hours per week, which is 13.4 hours over the norm of 37.5 hours per week, and in excess of the 48-hour maximum recommended by the European Working Time Directive (Grove 2016). Many are experiencing despair and dream of quitting the profession (Fazackerley 2019; Gill 2010). Full professors in the Netherlands are working 55-hour weeks and spending only 17% of their time on research (Matthews 2018). That is why, ultimately, this problem is structural and trying to pinpoint agential responsibility is a waste of time. Instead, political theorists and philosophers share political responsibility to try to make these changes.<sup>17</sup>

Even the first step — broadening the curriculum to be less male, Western and White — is challenging. As Simon Choat puts it, ‘the decolonisation of the curriculum cannot simply be the responsibility of individual module leaders, whether White or BME [Black and Minority Ethnic]. In the same way that the ultimate ambitions of attempts to decolonise the curriculum – to address racialised inequalities both within and outside universities – lie beyond specific modules, so it unlikely that those ambitions will succeed without broader institutional and societal changes’ (Choat 2021: 417). However, political philosophers and theorists cannot sit back and wait for those broader changes to come. We can be part of the solution by teaching and researching beyond the bounds of the canon and Anglo-American analytic political philosophy, even if it is incremental. If we all incrementally work on this, cumulatively over time change will occur. And as we teach more students non-Western and non-mainstream approaches to political philosophy, changes will come in the kind of philosophy that is produced in future.

<sup>16</sup> Personal correspondence on file with author.

<sup>17</sup> Iris Marion Young defines political responsibility as a non-blameworthy, shared form of responsibility generated by connection to structural injustice and which requires collective action. (Young 2011)



## Breaking the Cycle

These are nice words, but what does this look like in practice? There are at least three areas where action can be taken. The first is in the realm of the ‘top’ journals themselves. Practical advice comes from Olberding, who reached out to the journal *Hypatia* about their increased rates of publications in Asian philosophy. The journal’s editor, Sally Scholz, reported that she made various outreach efforts, including recruiting scholars of Asian philosophy to the editorial board, finding appropriately qualified referees for submissions in this field, and promoting the journal to a wider readership by, for example, using the simple analogue solution of arming a graduate student attending a conference in Taiwan with *Hypatia* postcards (Olberding 2016: 7).

In the realm of teaching, teaching can change if individual lecturers who have autonomy over what to teach decide to do it. Manjeet Ramgotra at SOAS posted online about her attempt at decolonising the introduction to political theory curriculum; for instance, she teaches bell hooks alongside Aristotle (Ramgotra 2015). Simon Choat changed his introductory syllabus year by year from 2016, incorporating more women and non-Western political thinkers, inspired by Ramgotra’s post (Choat 2021: 414). This was a process of trial and error and by his own admission was not perfect, but not only did his work improve the curriculum in terms of being less White, male, and Eurocentric, it also led to better results among Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students taking the course. Experiments in teaching can help the whole profession learn about best practice. Ramgotra and Choat are now co-authoring a textbook on political thinkers that expands the range of who counts. Since the existing textbooks on key political thinkers are horribly White, Euro-centric and male, such an endeavour does a great service to the whole profession.

Universities can support staff trying to re-work political theory modules by giving them less teaching and therefore more time to do the necessary preparation, instead of lecturers trying to fit it into their free time and doing yet more unpaid labour. Team-teaching can also alleviate the pressures, dividing the module up among several people so the burden does not fall on one person. And, of course, universities could actively hire faculty who work on Global South political theory. In the meantime, paying guest lecturers who specialize in these fields can be a stop-gap solution, especially adjuncts who may need the extra income (so long as they are adequately paid for their time).

Ultimately, however, my claim is that the neoliberalization of academia is to blame. Performance targets, constant assessment against arbitrary quantitative metrics developed by non-academics, increased workloads, and precarious working conditions, are all shaping how we are doing and teaching contemporary political theory. Political theorists alone cannot

overcome neoliberalism. But political theorists, as academics, can join trade unions. They can go on strike, and they can take other measures directed at reversing the neoliberal gouging of universities. In other words, they can collectively play their part in the larger struggle. The precariat has a significant role to play here. As Aimée Lê and Jordan Osserman argue ‘if we withdraw our labour en masse this will have an immediate and decisive impact, since the number of hours we are contracted to work is flagrantly and systematically under-estimated’ (Lê and Osserman 2021). Simultaneously, the smaller reforms aimed squarely at our profession, such as journals actively working to broaden their intellectual scope and lecturers making the effort to broaden curricula, are well within our reach.

## The Real Reason for the Game

Finally, while political theorists feel trapped in the game, it is important to consider who is benefitting. As a group, political theorists are not benefitting, because our intellectual horizons have narrowed, we are over-worked and stressed, we feel the need to constantly compete with our peers and the metrics against which we are assessed and had no hand in shaping, and many of us are under- or un-employed. In short, we are dominated by a system not of our making, which undermines our capacity for collective self-determination by pitting us against each other, and by undermining the capacity of excluded and marginalized political theorists from having any kind of say in shaping the field.

I started with lofty quotes from Keynes and Marx to illustrate that in the past political theorists were concerned with the public good (whatever you may think about their substantive views on that). But now, ‘The neoliberal university has abjured its identification with *res publica* so resoundingly. Academic praxis is now about obedience to bureaucratic authority and adding to the institution’s financial prosperity. Hence why many feel like overworked subcontractors rather than public educators dedicated to advancing human knowledge and cultural progress’ (Fleming 2021: 40). Political theorists/philosophers are working themselves into early graves, or at least early retirement (perhaps without a pension) for the sake of increasing their university’s score in league tables, thereby attracting more students, thus making money for some already very rich people.

The journal system is also a vehicle for making some very rich people even richer. It costs \$25 to read a single *Ethics* article, \$42 for a *Philosophy & Public Affairs* article and \$48 for a *Journal of Political Philosophy* article, if a person does not have institutional access. Most of the world’s population do not have an institutional affiliation, many academics at Global South universities or less well-endowed universities in the North do not have access to these articles through their institutional libraries, and many of the precariat are

unemployed. The business model of academic journals was pioneered by the notorious Robert Maxwell (Buranyi 2017). Academics write articles for free (often in their spare time), then Elsevier, Springer and Wiley publish them charging libraries and individuals absurd amounts to access the content and coming away with a 40% profit margin (Monbiot 2011, 2018; Posada and Chen 2017). These journals add no value to our work. The peer review process is undertaken by people working for free. Journal editors work for free. None of us are getting paid. So why do we continue to participate? The civic-minded among us want to publish in open access journals, but that is a luxury the precariat cannot afford.

The underlying structure of our field is this: we strive to publish articles in ‘top’ journals to secure jobs and prestige, aligning our research to those journals thereby marginalizing people, topics, and methodologies these journals do not support (which usually align with already structurally marginalized peoples and modes of knowledge), all in the service of lining the pockets of the businesses that now run universities and have monopolized academic publishing. Intellectual creativity, diversity, and dissent are all stifled. We must ask ourselves, is this what we want our profession to be? Change will not come from the managerial class and significant external change is a long way off. It is therefore incumbent on us as political theorists to collectively decide what we want our profession to be and to take steps (however difficult that is) to achieve it.

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