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THE PHILOSOPHERS HAVE ONLY INTERPRETED THE WORLD

ABSTRACT

Many political philosophers happily repeat Marx's Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach (inscribed on his gravestone) 'The Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways. The point, however, is to change it.' Marx had a theory of change: proletarian revolution. But what theory of change is appropriate in current circumstances? In this paper I will consider the steps that typically foreshadow and lead to policy change and the potential for philosophy and philosophers to contribute.¹

KEYWORDS

political philosophy,
theory of change,
justice, social
movements, activism

Introduction

Many political philosophers were initially drawn into the subject because of injustices or political problems they experienced, or at least perceived, in the world around them. If, for example, we think of the 1960s and early 1970s many philosophers, including some who had made their name in other areas, such as Thomas Nagel and T.M. Scanlon, turned to political philosophy because of the urgent political questions confronting the United States at the time. This included the civil rights movement in the U.S. as well as the Vietnam war, and other urgent moral questions of the day such as the legal permissibility of abortion, and global poverty. Some classic papers on topics such as freedom of speech, civil disobedience, just and unjust war, abortion, and duties to the distant were the result (for example, Thomson 1971, Nagel 1972, Scanlon 1972, Singer 1972, Walzer 1973). A high proportion of these contributions were

¹ Versions of this paper have been presented at Oxford, Frankfurt, Leuven and Belgrade. I'm very grateful to the audiences for their comments, and particularly to Katarina Pitasse Fragozo and Louis Larue. A shorter paper making some of the same arguments has been published as Wolff 2025a.

published in the newly founded journal *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, which almost immediately became the leading venue for political philosophy addressed to problems of practical urgency. However, as time has gone on and the initial period of fervid activity cooled into a more academic discourse, political philosophy has come to resemble more mainstream areas in philosophy where the immediate topic of discussion is often not a new or newly urgent problem of apparent injustice, but whether another philosopher was right or wrong in what they said, and that may well have been what they said in response to yet another philosopher. Dilligence, rigour and conceptual innovation have been valued above imaginative recommendation for policy change, which, at least until recently was either denigrated as somehow unworthy of philosophers or said to be outside the philosopher's realm of expertise.

More recently, though, there has been renewed interest in how political philosophers can make more directed contributions to policy, or at least to policy debates, rather than remaining at the more abstract level. Here we are recovering something of the earlier spirit of political philosophers, for virtually all of the great political philosophers of the past were also deeply engaged in the practical political questions of their time (Wolff 2025b). Today certain topics, such as global poverty, and climate change, are the focus of enormous international philosophical attention, with the ethics of AI also becoming highly prominent. It is clear that, in addressing these topics, philosophers want to change the world. But how can we do so, or at least contribute to change?

The connection between political philosophy and real politics needs to be handled with care. Some have warned that that philosophers should not enter the political arena unschooled, for without the right background knowledge we can look naïve at best, or do actual harm at worst (Lilla 2001). I agree. But my recommendation is not that we should keep out of politics, but rather than we should become schooled. But schooled in what exactly? I have argued elsewhere for the obvious, though often neglected, claim that to make recommendations about any particular area one needs detailed knowledge of current practice, law and regulation, the moral dilemmas that we face in the area, together with an understanding of history and international comparisons (Wolff 2018, Wolff 2019). But I want to discuss the next step here. Beyond making policy recommendations, how are philosophers to contribute to change in the world?

The Theory of Change

In many areas of social science and social policy it is common to use the idea of a theory of change, which I take to be the entirely reasonable question of how to bring about the transition from where we are to where we want to be. An educationalist, for example, might believe that the current national curriculum of their country is not in the best educational interests of school children and propose changes (cf. Freire 1970). But without a series of mechanisms by which those changes can be proposed, discussed, and, if agreed, implemented, then the proposal is not directly part of a reform movement, but rather a

contribution to debate, albeit one that might influence those with more practical levers to pull.

The idea of a theory of change may sound too grandiose: why a theory, and why should we expect one theory to cover many cases? But the impulse behind it is laudable: if you want to influence the real world, you owe an explanation of how that can be achieved. However, the topic of a theory of change is rarely, if ever, discussed in political philosophy. Yet this does not mean that there are no theories of change; rather that they appear in a less formal setting. They have occurred most often within socialist thought, notably set out by those who were later identified by Marx and Engels as Utopian Socialists. Here the main theory of change was enlightened demonstration: that by setting up ideal communities, others will see what they offer and will be persuaded to follow. Robert Owen and Charles Fourier are the main examples, and they both had some modest success in the United States, although they never caught on at scale. The Kibbutz movement in Israel is a more sustained example of something similar, although it has remained a small part of Israel's economy and was the result of a social movement rather than an attempt to realise a philosopher's vision. Another, more notorious, theory of change is Karl Marx's call for a proletariat revolution: this has certainly been the inspiration for major world change, if rarely led by the type of proletariat movement Marx expected. It is a model of change few political philosophers adopt now. In fact, I think that most political philosophers implicitly assume that we do not need a theory of change as we live in political systems that themselves incorporate a mechanism of change. Democracy, in other words, in which elected politicians, civil servants and other government officials, and voters, all have their role to play. Yet even democracy is fraught with difficulties. The burst of activity in political philosophy in the 1960s and 1970s was a response to the fact that democracies were not listening, or were far too slow. Today we have the problem that democracies around the world seem to have been captured by bad faith actors. But even without these problems, political philosophers have tended to have a rather wooden understanding of political process, forgetting that politics comes in layers: central and local, with, in many jurisdictions, other levels such as states or provinces, in between. Indeed, for those working on the topics of global policy or climate change, which would involve significant global cooperation, it is not even clear that the needed institutions currently even exist (Cripps 2013). But more broadly political philosophers have tended to write as if they are in dialogue with those who hold the highest office: presidents, prime ministers, and ministers of state. And it is true that such people make the most fateful decisions. But when citizens think about their relation to officials, they are much more like to think about local government and services rather than national policies, as they live the details of their lives at this local level, affected by the quality of local schools, health care facilities and public transport (Wolff and de-Shalit 2023, Pitasse Fragoso 2021). Of course they pay taxes, determined by central authorities, and are subject to the laws of the land, including laws regulating business, but much of the texture of their

day-to-day lives is the result of local decisions and policies, unglamorous as this territory may be for political philosophers.

Hence even if political philosophers gesture towards democracy as the avenue by which change is to take place, they still need to position themselves in relation to democratic agents. Who are you trying to influence: politicians, civil servants, or the electorate? And at which level? Global, national, local, or something less formal? Few philosophers seem to have given any attention to these questions, although there is now much greater sensitivity within political philosophy to how agents of the state and the people they govern interact (Zacka 2017 is a leading example). Here I will largely follow the tradition of assuming that interaction will take place with politicians at the highest level, and that any influence philosophers have on the broader public is aimed at voters in national elections, leaving aside, for current purposes, other levels and actors which, for some concerns, may be much more fruitful sites of intervention.

3. Forms of Action

It would be wrong, though, to suggest that political philosophers have ignored questions of activism for social change. Iris Marion Young has argued that real transformation comes from social movements and implies that if philosophers want to make a difference, they should partner in some way with social movements that are fighting for the same cause (Young 1990). But activism is, in some forms, a topic in political philosophy itself. Notably, John Rawls, in *A Theory of Justice* (Rawls 1971, 1999) has an influential discussion of civil disobedience as part of what he calls ‘non-ideal theory’. Here he is partially influenced by the powerful writings and speeches of Martin Luther King Jr (King 1963). For both Rawls and King civil disobedience is a public, non-violent, act in which protestors appeal to the sense of justice of their fellow citizens to put pressure on those in authority to negotiate change. Protestors are organised, politically committed, prepared, often trained, and prepared to accept consequences. Hence civil disobedience lies at the fringes of liberal democracy, outside of normal processes, but recognisably continuous with them, and inspired by the same ideas.

Such formal, public, protests contrast with the much more hidden and informal practices that James C. Scott describes in *Weapons of the Weak*: sabotage, foot-dragging, evasion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, arson, dissimulation and slander (Scott 1985). This is the stuff of everyday resistance and protest, but much more a catalogue of forms of individual action and self-protection rather than concerted political action. It is, nevertheless, a reminder that the philosophical discussion of civil disobedience has tended to concentrate on one form, potentially very costly to the individual if caught and punished. Nevertheless, for King, Rawls, and Scott these are all ways in which people act outside the formal rules of the system. My question here is much more about how philosophers can contribute to normal political processes. When political processes are in reasonably good order, how and when can philosophers intervene? And we have already seen part of the challenge. Iris

Marion Young encourages philosophers to join with social movements (Young 1990). But this has a number of related demands which will not come easily to many philosophers. First, as academics, our natural habitat is the library (maybe now the virtual library) rather than the streets or virtual streets. Many prefer social solitude to protracted interaction. Second, most academic work in the discipline continues to be produced by lone scholars, although joint work is becoming a little more common, with two or sometimes three co-authors. But collaboration in research and writing remains the exception. And the reason for this is connected to the main difficulty: philosophers pride themselves on being creatures of the Kantian enlightenment: thinking for themselves. The partial surrender of judgement needed to work with others, at least for the sake of finding common cause, requires a type of compromise that goes against our heavily individualist training and instincts. Philosophers want to be thought leaders – even if they end up leading only themselves – rather than followers. This can make activism very difficult.

Here an observation from Terrel Carver can be very helpful. In assessing academic interpretations of Marx, Carver asked: if these interpretations were accurate accounts of Marx's thought, would they attract an audience, unite a movement and proceed to a goal (Carver, 2017)? Independent of Marx scholarship, I find this a very helpful summary of the steps needed to translate theory to practice, even if the third 'proceed to a goal' is underspecified. But just by looking at the first two, we see how challenging the task is. It is true that some political philosophers, even contemporary political philosophers, have attracted an audience. John Rawls, albeit largely an academic audience, and Peter Singer are two prominent names. And Singer's advocacy of animal liberation (Singer 1995) and effective altruism (Singer 2015) have both attracted audiences outside the narrow specialism of philosophy. Singer, arguably, has even been part of a group that has united a movement. Others, such as Amartya Sen, have gone further still and it is possible to see a direct connection between his work on the measurement of poverty and United Nations policy initiatives. Indeed, the broader Human Development and Capability Movement, also inspired by Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum 2000), Sabina Alkire (Alkire 2002) and Ingrid Robeyns (Robeyns 2017), among many others now, has had broad academic and policy influence. But it is very interesting that in these cases philosophers have had to overcome their inclination to work purely independently and have joined with others, across disciplines and contexts, which has led to inevitable compromises. For example, the index of human development derived from Sen's work has been, at times, so stripped down and simplified for purposes of implementation, that there is very little chance that it would have been accepted by a peer review philosophy journal (Sen and Anand 1994).

Few of us can aspire to have the influence of Rawls, or Singer or Sen, although there must be one or two more brewing somewhere. But even those with the greatest personal influence did not do their initial philosophical work in isolation and drew on, and were sharpened by criticism from, many others. Even the most scholarly academic debate in political philosophy, then, can

have a practical edge, intentionally or inadvertently contributing to the development of a message that could ultimately attract an audience. And without that first stage, it seems hard to see how much more could develop.

4. The Role of New Ideas

The background to any attempt to change the world has to be a perception that there is something wrong with the world as it is, and that it is both important and possible to make changes. Behind such a perception, though, lies another question. Why is injustice tolerated and change not happening? The philosopher's stock in trade is ideas or conceptual innovation – or at least so many of us believe – and so the philosopher will have a natural role to play if the reason why change is not happening is connected in some way with inadequate conceptualisation, or, in other words, a shortage of new ideas. But political philosophy is hardly a novel subject, and it seems the height of arrogance to think that any of us could come up with something that has eluded the greatest thinkers for 2,500 years. Now, this may be over-stating things. For much of that 2,500 years conceptual innovation was not a priority, and the intellectual task was to elaborate and defend a tradition, and often a ruling class, rather than to issue challenges. Perhaps the relevant time-frame is not 2,500 years but 250 or even 50. During these more recent times there has been an astonishing proliferation of ideas for reform, and so the same pessimistic view about room for innovation seems reasonable. For example, in his 2020 book *How to Fight Inequality*, Ben Phillips, an activist rather than philosopher, suggests: 'We are, to be frank, not suffering from a dearth of ideas about what a government committed to tackling inequality could do' (Phillips 2020: 73). Contemporary debates recycle, and sometimes rename ideas ('The Green New Deal'), both tried and untried, that often have been floating around for decades.

Even the idea that we already have enough ideas is not new. Mikael Bakunin, is quoted as having said in 1873 'During the last nine years more than enough ideas for the salvation of the world have been developed in the International (if the world can be saved by ideas) and I defy anyone to come up with a new one. This is the time not for ideas but for action, for deeds' (quoted in Debord 1994: 92).

It is tempting to agree with Phillips and Bakunin that now is the time for action not words. But at the same time, we can find many roles for philosophical contributions, provided it is understood that such ideas are only part of the picture and need to be supplemented by many other types of action if they are to have a practical effect.

First, it is increasingly being recognised that the ideas produced in Western traditions of philosophy hardly exhaust the stock of ideas available, and many even within Western traditions are now seeking and finding inspiration in other philosophical traditions (see, for example, the papers in Robeyns 2025).

Second, I've mentioned before that some ideas have had an effect. Consider, for example, John Locke's theory of the social contract (Locke 1988), Jeremy

Bentham's defence of Utilitarianism (Bentham 1996), John Stuart Mill's defence both of Utilitarianism and Liberty (Mill 2003), and Mary Wollstonecraft's defence of the rights of women (Wollstonecraft 2004). These are among the basic building blocks of the liberal, democratic world we now occupy, and although many adopt these ideas without knowing their origin, and others reject or argue against them, it would be absurd to argue that the ideas of these philosophers have had no influence. But if ideas in the past can have influence why should we think that this process comes to an end? Theorists today can add to the stock that will influence the future, often in ways we do not notice. Earlier I mentioned Peter Singer, John Rawls and Amartya Sen and it is interesting to reflect on how their contributions have drawn on the past. Take Singer's arguments for animal liberation (Singer 1995). While it could hardly be said that Singer's goal of equality for animals has been achieved, it cannot be denied that his arguments have had force and many more people are paying attention to the needs and interests of non-human animals than even a few decades ago. Of course, Singer did not do this on his own, and it is very hard, if even possible, to untangle how exactly public debates have been formed and influenced, but Singer has been an exemplar of a public philosopher, whether or not one agrees with his views. Interestingly, though, Singer has not so much provided entirely new arguments but rather taken fragments of arguments, especially from Jeremy Bentham, refine and develop them to bring out their intellectual and rhetorical power.

John Rawls is rather different. Although explicitly drawing on the social contract tradition especially of Locke, Rousseau and Kant, and highly influenced by the Utilitarianism especially of Sidgwick, his most distinctive idea – the Difference Principle, which states that in a just society the worst off are to be made as well off as possible – seems to be his own construction (Rawls 1971, 1999). There are similar thoughts, such as the idea then current in the British Labour Party that inequalities must be made to be in the interests of everyone if they are to be justified (Hampshire 1972), and some religions encourage a particular concentration on the poor, but these all fall short of Rawls' insistence that the worst off are to be made as well off they can be. Hence Rawls, so it seems, shows there is room for new ideas.

In relation to drawing on their philosophical predecessors, Sen, it seems to me, is halfway between Singer and Rawls in his development and advocacy of the Capability Approach, which has proven extraordinarily influential. Sen argues that instead of paying attention only to subjective well-being and material resources, such as money, we should instead measure outcomes and policies in terms of the capabilities for functioning that people have, or, in short what they can 'do or be' (Sen 1979). There are two related sources of bafflement, though, about the tremendous influence that Sen's theory has had. First, he declines to provide a list of basic capabilities, or specify them in detail, saying that this must be left to the democratic procedures of each country. Second, some might wonder how his approach differs from the very many theories that conceive well-being in terms of need-satisfaction, which are often

specified in much more detail (e.g., Doyal and Gough 1991). Why, for example, is providing the capability to be nourished any different to satisfaction of the need for food? To my mind, though, the difference between need-based views and the capability approach is that need theory implicitly paints a picture of passive recipients, lacking agency and accepting alms or charity. The capability approach shifts the language to one of agency, empowering people by removing barriers as well as providing resources. Hence there is both continuity with other approaches, as with Singer, and innovation, as with Rawls. Of course, this is a very simple picture, which could no doubt be contested, but the point is to lay out three different models of how contemporary political philosophers have been able to continue to shape and articulate the world of values that lie behind attempts to change the world: refining (Singer) innovating (Rawls) and constructive modification (Sen).

While these models are inspiring, the reality is that however talented a political philosopher, the chance that their ideas will be taken up is vanishingly small. But it is still possible to contribute in numerous ways. I've already said that normal academic practices of discussion, criticism and application all contribute to the development and refinement of ideas that may have an influence. None of the thinkers I mentioned worked in a vacuum. Furthermore, and this is the point that occurs perhaps most easily when we think of our impact as political philosophers, we teach students. The point is not that we try to recruit students to a cause through indoctrination, as many critics of the universities suppose, but rather we help them understand positions and arguments and to clarify their own thinking. It may well be that some are persuaded by their reading, or even their lectures, and perhaps the few that go into policy may make different decisions than they would have done without the study of political philosophy. But be that as it may, the general quality of political debate and understanding is improved, we can at least hope, as a result of our teaching.

Developing our students through our teaching is a contribution we all make, and it can be a comfort to reflect on this when our writings fail to reach the audience we hope for. But impactful writing is an aspiration for many, and I want now to turn to another model of successful development of ideas. Although we tend to focus on those who have made contributions to the development of positive theories, there is another way in which ideas can be developed, and, indeed, more striking and urgent impact achieved. This is not through the development of new theories or concepts of justice, but the identification of ways in which the world is manifestly unjust, against a background in which those injustices have not been noticed as injustices. I have often used two examples from Sen in this respect. One is observation that there are many millions of 'missing women' in the world, which he sees as a consequence of isolated but systematic neglect of the health and nutrition of young girls, dying at a slightly higher rate than their brothers who are shown greater concern by their parents and communities in times of hardship. Millions of individual tragedies add up to a systematic, though previously unnoticed, major injustice. The second case is that of famines. The point is well understood now, but Sen was among the

first to make widely known that famines are not caused by lack of food, for in the modern world it is not difficult to get food to starving populations if there is the will to do it. Rather, famines are caused by political failures that lead to lack of entitlement to food. Sen argued that there had never been a famine in a democracy with a free press, as the publicity would certainly endanger the ruling party's chances of re-election. Whether or not that is so, we have certainly learnt that famines in the modern world are not natural tragedies but deliberately or accidentally caused by political action and equally can be remedied by political action.

What is so interesting about these cases is that, if the facts are accepted, the injustice becomes apparent and urgent. But, it might be said, discovering such facts is not the task of the philosopher and outside our training. Sen, of course, is a celebrated economist as well as philosopher, and it is his training as an economist that allows him to see patterns in data that others have missed. Why should philosophers think they can contribute to the exposition of systematic, previously unnoticed, injustice? One reason is that identifying some issues require more detailed conceptual work. Consider, for example, the work of Iris Marion Young. Her earlier work, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Young 1990) set out a challenge to liberal political philosophy in identifying what she called 'five faces of oppression' exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence, which she claimed should be the focus of our concern rather than distribution of rights, liberties and resources. Liberal theorists were, at first, somewhat complacent in the light of this challenge. Are these not injustices? Are they not connected to abuse of rights and liberties or maldistribution of resources? Surely they can be accommodated into liberal theory? But the point is that even if accommodated, they are then ignored. The issue, as I now see it, is that when political philosophers set out ideal theories of justice, the urgent injustices of everyday life simply disappear. Poverty is another example for there is no poverty in the ideal world. Like Sen, Young has paid attention to empirical injustices rather than developing a theory in isolation. Violence, such as gun and knife crime and domestic violence, blight contemporary societies, but who is the liberal theorist of violence? Indeed, it is often by looking at theorists outside the liberal mainstream that we can come to learn both about the developing and developed world. Franz Fanon is a leading example. His discussion of violence in colonial settings is not only shocking and unsettling in itself but can sensitise us to perceive similar issues in all societies (Fanon 1963). By coming down to earth, philosophers can help social movements and activists develop stronger normative grounds for their case.

In her early work Young's novelty was to bring political philosophy into connection with social movements. Her later work, and in particular her development of the concept of structural injustice, does something different (Young 2011). It provides a new way of looking at a very puzzling phenomenon; where individuals feel that they suffer an injustice but there is no other individual they can point to who is the cause of that injustice and therefore owes a remedy. Whether Young's examples actually provide the best illustration of

the point has been contested (see for example McKeown 2024, Letsas 2024, Watts-Cobbe and McMordie 2024), but the general observation is very insightful. If we always look for an ‘agent of injustice’ we are going to miss some of the things that ordinary individuals feel are the great injustices, such as not being able to afford to live in the neighbourhood or even town in which they were raised and have made a life among friends and relatives. Now, there will be work to be done in each case to show that each complaint reflects an injustice, but Young’s analysis disqualifies the easy response that it cannot be an injustice because it is not the fault of anyone in particular, unlike, say, theft. Here the development of a new concept – albeit one that bears comparison with others which were also introduced to fill this gap (Wolff 2024) – enables a new way of looking at the world, and one that once introduced can be widely shared and appreciated.

Creating a new vocabulary allows the articulation of feelings or complaints that have remained hidden far below the surface. Paulo Freire argues that addressing oppression requires ‘naming the world’ – finding a language to express oppression – as well as confronting those who refuse to accept the new vocabulary (Freire 1970), which is a phenomenon we are experiencing right now with, for example, attacks on the concept of gender and the individual choice of use of personal pronouns.²

The claim that we have all the ideas that we need assumes that we already have all the concepts we need to articulate the injustices suffered by all social groups, all over the world, including the most oppressed and silenced. On the face of it, this seems unlikely in the extreme, and there is much detailed work to do to uncover forms of what can be called ‘manifest injustices’, by which I mean the type of situation that seems obviously unjust to all reasonable people (without a vested interest) once it is revealed, but until it is named remains submerged and difficult to access.

In some cases, the practice identified is reasonably well-known yet providing a name can provide a further impetus and focus for reflection, and, ultimately, action. Leif Wenar, for example, coined the term ‘Blood Oil’ drawing on the idea of ‘Blood Diamonds’ to capture the idea of oil that has been appropriated often by the ruling family of a developing country and sold as if it is their own asset rather than the common property of their country (Wenar 2016). In my own work with Avner de-Shalit the term ‘clustering of disadvantages’ was used to describe the phenomenon of suffering from various disadvantages which often intensify each other, such as homelessness, job loss, and poor mental and physical health (Wolff and de-Shalit 2007). These associations were, of course, well-known before our work, but having the term has allowed theorists to encapsulate a complex phenomenon in a few words, and thereby heighten awareness and discussion. But probably the most impressive example in recent decades is Miranda Fricker’s concept of

2 I thank Katarina Pitasse Fragoso and Natalia Brigagão for both, independently, making me aware of the relevance of Freire in this context.

epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007), developed further by philosophers such as Kristie Dotson (Dotson 2011) and Jose Medina (Medina 2012). Fricker has taken a series of ordinary, related, complaints – no one listens to me, or takes me seriously, or gives me an opportunity to speak – and theorised them as an injustice with a victim who has a new language to express how they are treated. This work of making invisible or submerged injustices manifest is, in my view, a critically important task for philosophers, and in a changing world is likely to be work that never comes to an end.

5. From Ideas to Change

The picture painted in the last section was one that suggested that political philosophers continue to have very valuable work to do, even if it is not as traditionally conceived: setting out new theories or templates of a just society. Nevertheless, these contributions remain at the level of theory: they are interpretations, not change. How is the step to change to be attempted? In early sections I have mentioned the importance of joining with social movements, although I would not want to restrict possibilities to this as individual advocacy and action can also be effective, by the right person at the right time. Consider, for example, the career of James Baldwin who made an immensely powerful impression by showing the power and wit of his mind especially when being patronised by complacent white interviewers, and thereby showed what African Americans can do, though at the same time are rarely given the chance, confounding lazy, prejudicial stereotypes.³

Social movements can open up new forms of dialogue and be open to new ways of conceptualising the world, and bring novel or neglected values into the political sphere (Hill Collins 1990, Watt-Cloutier 2018, Gago 2020), although as Linda May Alcoff has argued, recent fragmentation and academic scepticism about values such as progress and truth may have weakened support for social movements (Alcoff 2011). But even if social movements are reinvigorated in ways Alcoff outlines, social movements on their own are not change; laws and policies will need to be implemented or reformed (Wolff and Mantouvalou 2024). What is the intermediate step between social movements and change in law? There are many, of course, but the key one is that someone with power and influence has to change their mind, or at least become motivated to act on considerations that had not moved them to action before. How is that to be done? There are handbooks, written in the 1970s, that try to show how, such as Alinsky (Alinsky 1971) and Walzer (Walzer 1971), but the key question is how to change minds, if you cannot change governments. And as we all know from interpersonal relations, the trick is to arrange things so that it becomes easier for the person concerned to agree with you than continue to resist. By what mechanisms can this happen?

3 I thank Vafa Ghazavi for this example. One notorious exchange, with the philosopher Paul Weiss can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hzH5lDnLaBA>

Very broadly we can say that the mechanisms fall into two types: those that make it easier to live with others, and those that make it easier to live with themselves. To take the second category first, here the appeal is to the conscience of policy makers: making it clear that they are complicit in injustice, and trying to accentuate feelings of guilt, often through publicity in words and images, of the injustices they are ignoring or even encouraging. Whether this works depends on the person and the situation of course, but politicians often cultivate an insensitivity, believing that they have to steel themselves to take tough decisions.

Consequently, making it harder to live with others may be the better avenue. What can this be? Facing intense daily pressure from the public and the media is one possibility, such as the civil protest advocated by Martin Luther King (King 1963). However, politicians may take standing up to pressure simply as part of the job. But another route is to consider what motivates people. Obviously power, money and fame, but is this all? Many crave the admiration of those they admire, and this provides another possible route. Influencing a person's circle – if they can be identified and themselves convinced – can provide another way of putting pressure on someone with executive power. But again, all of this depends on dissemination of ideas, images, arguments and means of persuasion. The lesson is, I think, that ideas can, after all, help bring about social change, but they have to be the right ideas, in the right place, at the right time. Knowing how to access these places is a skill that goes beyond our expertise, though, and is another reason for teaming up with people with complementary experience and expertise.

6. What can we do? What can I do?

If the last section is correct, or close to it, then the question for each of us is what can we do to help intensify the pressure that can lead to politicians changing their minds? For most political philosophers the opportunities of venturing outside academic forms of communication are limited. Consequently, the occasional blog, read if by anyone then by other academics, or a few op-eds or radio appearances can be enough to generate a reputation as a public communicator. In terms of the difference to the world such things make in themselves, though, the impact is surely minimal. But this is only to be expected. Change typically requires many voices saying more or less the same thing, and with the exception of a few celebrities or public figures, it is impossible to attribute influence to anyone in particular. Being part of a philosophical community in which arguments are made, criticised, amended, and then, perhaps, popularised and spread is already to be part of a community which sparks social change, even if every one of those contributions one makes personally is individual and not collaborative. It is a further step to engage in collaboration with people from other disciplines and even more with social activists. And this will not suit everyone. Often in life it is better to spend your efforts doing what you can do well, rather than dissipating them on things you are not suited for,

although, with effort and determination, it is possible to extend one's range, of course. In choosing where to place one's efforts, it is helpful to think in terms of supply and demand: what can I do, and what is most needed? Theoretical contributions serve to develop new ideas, but also, and more urgently, to understand why things are not happening, or going wrong.

In sum, I do not have a new theory of how to make changes, but would emphasise that contributions can be made in many different ways. Few will develop a new theory of justice, and it is questionable whether this is our urgent priority now. But many can help to point out under-recognised injustices. The next step, for those who feel equipped to take it, is to work in partnership with others, such as activists, journalists, or social scientists to outline practical solutions, and then, if needed, the much bigger and more painful step of making life uncomfortable for those with the power but not the will to implement beneficial change.

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Džonatan Volf

Filozofi su samo tumačili svet

Apstrakt

Mnogi politički filozofi rado ponavljaju Marksovu Jedanaestu tezu o Feuerbachu" (uklesanu na njegovom nadgrobnom spomeniku): „Filozofi su samo različito tumačili svet. Suština je, međutim, promeniti ga.“ Marks je imao teoriju promene: proleterku revoluciju. Ali koja teorija promene je prikladna u današnjim okolnostima? U ovom radu razmotriću korake koji obično prethode i vode ka promeni politike, kao i potencijal filozofije i filozofa da doprinesu tom procesu.

Ključne reči: politička filozofija, teorija promene, pravda, društveni pokreti, aktivizam

