

"The point is to change it"

The world and his wife

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Our current political moment is characterised by such extreme and shocking violence that any measured reflection on the role of philosophy in public life can seem impossible. The elevated ideas that accompanied the rise of international organisations in the 20th century — peace, harmony, order, cooperation — appear as distant from reality as at any moment since the end of the second world war. The events of the year 2024, and in particular Israel's merciless genocide of Palestinians in Gaza, resolutely backed by the UK, the US and other western powers, were described by observers as a 'breaking point' and 'death blow' for international order.¹ And yet if brute force still governs the world, the language of force does not. Principles that we might call philosophical in nature are still being articulated constantly in public life. Across the world, in both popular and official discourse, we find references to progress, fairness, efficiency, justice, development and peace.

I want to suggest in this essay that philosophy has a role to play in politics even if its actual operation in the world is not easy to discern. Philosophy, understood capaciously — I leave aside in this essay debates about the differences between political theory and political philosophy — can challenge the common assumptions and limits that frame political discourse. By asking questions that go beyond the usual bounds of public debate, it can illuminate the unexamined and ahistorical assumptions that are to be found everywhere in public life. This type of philosophy is not the exclusive preserve of scholars working in universities. Anyone who has sought to name and describe a form of domination they experience, with the aim of resisting it, is — in my sense of the term — a philosopher. Many of those who lived under colonial rule, for example, developed forms of anticolonial thought that radically challenged the legitimacy of empire. Their arguments are expressions of political philosophy that show why imperial formations like Britain cannot be understood as isolated and singular national units.

Since the wave of decolonisation in the 20th century created a world of sovereign and supposedly equivalent states, many academic political theorists have been interested in the question of borders. Do national borders have any moral value? Do we owe more to fellow citizens of our own states than to the citizens of other states? But these questions are not often found in public discourse. What predominates in the mainstream media and among the largest political parties is a kind of certainty that sees the central actor of politics as a nation, distinct from and locked into endless competition with other nations. In a competitive world, ‘we’ must not lose out to ‘them’ — the vaguely hostile multitudes living beyond our protective borders but threatening constantly to traverse them.

This position corresponds broadly to a philosophical approach known as communitarianism. It emphasises the moral value of communities, which in the modern world are typically understood as sovereign states. It finds the borders that protect those states to be morally just. And the aim of foreign policy is basically to maintain or improve a country’s position vis-à-vis the positions of other states. Here is Winston Churchill explaining in 1914 that ‘we’, the British: ‘... are not a young people with an innocent record and a scanty inheritance ... We have engrossed to ourselves an altogether disproportionate share of the wealth and traffic of the world. We have got all we want in territory, and our claim to be left in the unmolested enjoyment of vast and splendid possessions, mainly acquired by violence, largely maintained by force, often seems less reasonable to others than to us.’ (Darwin, 2009). Churchill’s remarks were not intended to be self-critical. As a politician, he saw his role as helping to maintain Britain’s ‘disproportionate share’ rather than bring it into question.

Communitarian attitudes dominate conversations about immigration in Britain. If public opinion is divided on the question — polls show complicated and shifting attitudes, depending on how the question is framed — there is much less complexity in electoral politics. Politicians generally compete in their expressions of hostility to new arrivals. After winning the 2024 general election, the Labour party swiftly announced ‘new measures to cut historically high levels of net migration.’ At the Conservative party conference in October 2024, the contenders for party leadership all stressed their anti-migrant attitudes. ‘The world and his wife and their extended family...’ cannot come to Britain, said Robert Jenrick. ‘The age of mass migration must end.’ On X, he promised to ‘deport foreign criminals, get terrorists off our streets, and end illegal migration’. Immigrants who bring ‘foreign conflicts’ with them should not come to Britain, said Kemi Badenoch, who

eventually won the leadership contest. She added that ‘not all cultures are equally valid’ and that some immigrants bring with them ‘ancestral ethnic hostilities.’ James Cleverly, a former government minister, said that ‘dozens’ of asylum seekers would now be in Rwanda if he and his colleagues had remained in power. All these are strongly communitarian arguments. They animate much of the public and media discussion on migration through the use of terms like ‘secure borders’, ‘small boats’, ‘asylum seekers’, ‘illegal immigration’, ‘foreign criminals’, and ‘deportations’ — all of which stress the idea of an embattled political community. I am talking about Britain, but the story is a similar one in other Western countries like the US, France, Germany and Australia.

And yet political theory and philosophy, by which I mean critical and sustained reflection about politics that is not confined to the logic of policymaking, shows many alternatives to the communitarian position. Some argue straightforwardly for a radical cosmopolitanism that treats all people across the world as moral equals. Others focus on how nations have historically come to be imagined, and what is included and excluded from those acts of imagination. This latter view is, I suggest, a particularly useful one for thinking about the question of borders and immigration. With respect to Britain, it shows how the state was constituted through — and cannot be separated from — a form of hierarchical engagement with the world in the form of imperialism. A public discourse might paint Britain as an embattled political community. But this elides the fact that, as Churchill suggested, Britain is, on balance, the beneficiary of a global order that it constructed in its own interests. And this makes the idea of Britain as a bounded entity unconvincing in both historical and moral terms.

Such arguments have long been articulated by colonised peoples. ‘It was the sweat of the black man’s brow which laid the foundation for the present day opulence of Britain and White America,’ wrote an anonymous Sierra Leonean editorialist in 1938. The editorialist compared the relationship of Britain and Sierra Leone to that of ‘the cheat’ with ‘his victim’, and insisted the peoples of West Africa had a right to reparations after suffering for centuries from enslavement, colonisation, and forced transportation (“Rambling Talks,” *Sierra Leone Weekly News*, July 2, 1938.). Similar arguments across anticolonial writing saw Britain as a country whose present existence cannot be separated from its history as the centre of what was once the world’s most expansive empire. As Kojo Koram wrote recently: ‘Rather than saying Britain had an empire, it would be more accurate to say that the empire had Britain.’ (Koram, 2024).

A historically informed reflection on national identity opens up ways of thinking about politics beyond the reflexive defensiveness that characterises so much of contemporary discourse. It also throws into question the boundaries of the body that is imagined as the subject of politics. The categories through which our current political language is articulated depend on the idea of a separation between the domestic and international. Yet anticolonialists have long challenged that separation. In its place, they have insisted on the co-constitution of what came to be known as the global north and south. As Fanon put it: 'Europe is literally the creation of the Third World' (Fanon, 1963). Since the encompassing of the earth by western empires, national groups have always been imagined as elements of world-spanning projects. This is true for anticolonial nationalisms no less than colonial ones.

There are of course those who will bristle at any attempt to challenge the deeply rooted idea of national interest. 'Some people love to talk our country down,' said James Cleverly during the Conservative leadership contest. But 'this country has given so much to so many people.' It is easy to imagine the retort to this claim. The left is more patriotic than the right because its vision of 'our country' is more egalitarian and less beholden to elite interests. Yet each side of this debate, which dates back at least to the French Revolution, is circumscribed by the same spatial demarcation that refuses to accept how 'we' are connected to 'them', those beyond our borders who are excluded from the conversation even as they so often constitute its obsessive subject.

In the popular imagination, political theory is written by academics who are mostly based in universities in Europe and the US. But there are many traditions of serious thought about politics — including those that emerge from anticolonial traditions, social movements and radical political formations — that are not included in this definition of political theory. Those traditions are vital in understanding the injustices of the world and the necessity for its reorganisation and reconstruction. The events of recent years have acted as a sharp reminder of the rigid hierarchies that still govern international politics and the extreme difficulty for the vast majority of the world's peoples of resisting imperial power even at its most shocking and rapacious. Since the advent of European socialism, some people have criticised these hierarchies from the perspective of working populations of the imperial core. They have suggested, for example, that workers in Europe and North America would benefit from diverting funding from military uses to hospitals, schools and other social services. These arguments are convincing, of course. And yet — for all their well-

intentioned nature — they reproduce the idea that the people who really count are those who constitute part of ‘our’ collective national body.

When we consider the ways in which Britain was historically constituted as an empire, and is still constituted today as part of an imperial formation, it is much less easy to justify any such political demarcation that separates Britain’s population from the subjects of its ex-colonies. One of Edward Said’s key contributions was to show how national identities, especially those forged in a colonial context, implicate other peoples in ways that cannot be forgotten or ignored. This means that there is simply no realistic concept of what Britain is that does not take into account its expansion across so much of Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean, not to speak of North America, Australia and New Zealand, in a centuries-long process that created not just a single nation or state but many different states locked into a global — and extremely unequal — system of production and exchange. Palestine is often described as relevant to Britain because of Britain’s history of colonisation of the region. This is true. Yet we also have to insist — looking to Gaza, Sudan, the Congo, Haiti — that the history of colonialism still lives with us in the present, in a singular world that our prevailing discourse wrongly depicts as compartmentalised.

Notes:

- 1 An interview with seven leading international experts on genocide found that in relation to Israel’s destruction of Gaza “the question is not controversial—even for those who previously rejected the label” (NRC, May 14, 2025).

References:

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