



Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy

ISSN: 1369-8230 (Print) 1743-8772 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/fcri20

Suella Braverman's dream

Sarah Fine

To cite this article: Sarah Fine (04 Jun 2025): Suella Braverman's dream, Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy, DOI: [10.1080/13698230.2025.2512270](https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2025.2512270)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2025.2512270>



© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 04 Jun 2025.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 377



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

Suella Braverman's dream

Sarah Fine 

Corpus Christi College, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

ABSTRACT

Those political philosophers seeking to contribute to political conversations and policy debates 'here and now' must contend with the significance of time (the 'now') and place (the 'here'). In her book, *Democracy and Exclusion* (Oxford University Press, 2023), Patti Tamara Lenard adopts 'a contextualist approach' to questions of migration justice. This involves recognising and accommodating the constraints within which policymakers operate, with a view to offering feasible policy recommendations appropriate to the context. In this paper, I consider two contextual challenges presented by time and place in politics: 1) the pace of change; and 2) differences between policy environments. This prompts a further, related question about the intended audiences for work in political philosophy.

KEYWORDS Migration; exclusion; democracy; contextualism; methodology; hostile environment

1

If a week is a long time in politics, as former British Prime Minister Harold Wilson once said, what does that mean for political philosophy? The fast pace of politics may not particularly trouble those political philosophers who think of themselves as participating in a philosophical enterprise primarily occupied with perennial questions about concepts and principles, and who, as G. A. Cohen put it, 'don't think there's anything special about either the here or the now' (Cohen, 2004). However, it may present more of a challenge for, say, those 'engaged' political philosophers interested in contributing to current political conversations, evaluating existing policies and proposing viable amendments or alternatives.¹ In addition, policies and policy environments vary across different jurisdictions, and so political philosophers engaged in the 'here and now' have to think not just about the significance of time (the 'now') but also about place (the 'here').

I was inspired to reflect on political philosophy and the pace and place of politics while reading Patti Tamara Lenard's sage and astute *Democracy and*

CONTACT Sarah Fine  sjf43@cam.ac.uk

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

Exclusion. Lenard argues, with great humanity and moral clarity, that ‘too many people are unjustly excluded from various goods to which they are entitled’ and reminds readers that even ‘in democracies that are characterized by injustice across multiple domains, progress towards justice can be made in important, although sometimes incremental, ways’ (p. 1). Without question, this is crucial work – a point made all the more salient by Lenard’s own tremendous practical success, for example, through co-founding Rainbow Haven, a volunteer-run organization that ‘works to sponsor, settle, and advocate for LGBTQ+ refugees and asylum seekers’ in Canada. As Lenard explains, her experiences with Rainbow Haven illustrate ‘that even small changes in the direction of justice have a monumental impact on the lives of those who can benefit from them’ (p. viii).

In the book, Lenard aims to address ‘specific migration dilemmas that are *currently* faced by, and often caused by, *diverse*, democratic states’ (emphasis added, p. 12). These issues, Lenard writes, ‘require some deep thinking, so that they can be resolved fairly *right now*’ (p.12, author’s emphasis). With those goals in mind, Lenard adopts what she calls ‘a contextualist approach’ to political theorising. In her view, such an approach recognises that, to achieve practical purchase, prescriptions must accommodate the apparent constraints within which policymakers operate (pp. 4–5).

Other contributions to this symposium on Lenard’s book engage with the substance of her prescriptions. I am especially interested in her invocation (and her version) of a ‘contextualist approach’ to the ethics and politics of exclusion.

2

A first question for Lenard’s contextual approach is how to specify the relevant ‘context’. A wide reading of the ‘context’ might be (current?) so-called democratic states in general. But, as Lenard notes, there are manifold important differences between states. A narrower reading of ‘context’ – suggested by lines such as ‘a contextual approach can generate policy recommendations that are attentive to the constraints and opportunities presented by a particular context’ (p. 5) – might be individual democratic states or groups of states. Specifying the relevant context matters, because different policy recommendations will be appropriate in different contexts.

So, in 2023, when first reading *Democracy and Exclusion*, I considered what a contextual approach to exclusion might look like there and then, in my ‘democratic state’ of residence, the United Kingdom (UK). At that time, the UK was explicitly fostering a ‘hostile environment’ for migrants.² Suella Braverman was the Home Secretary, in charge of the government department responsible for borders, migration, and naturalization, among other areas.³ Braverman made headlines with this

comment, from an interview at the Conservative Party Conference: 'I would love to be here ... claiming victory. I would love to have a front page of *The Telegraph* [the UK's leading Conservative-leaning broadsheet newspaper] with a plane taking off to Rwanda. That's my dream. It's my obsession.'⁴ This was a reference to the Home Office's stalled plan to deport some people seeking asylum in the UK to Rwanda. Soon after Braverman lost her job as Home Secretary, the Supreme Court ruled that the Rwanda asylum scheme was unlawful; Rwanda should not be treated as a safe country for people seeking asylum, and the Rwanda scheme could lead to the UK violating its non-refoulement obligations. The Conservative government was not deterred. It introduced the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill. One of the Bill's two purposes was to give 'effect to the judgement of Parliament that the Republic of Rwanda is a safe country.' In April 2024 the Bill became law (Safety of Rwanda Asylum and Immigration Act, 2024).

The Rwanda scheme was one of the Conservative government's flagship policies. The then Prime Minister Rishi Sunak promoted it during a press conference, while standing behind a lectern emblazoned with the words 'STOP THE BOATS'. The slogan referred to boats transporting people seeking asylum, crossing the Channel from France to the UK. According to news reports, leaked documents showed that the UK Foreign Office was considering setting up similar removal schemes with a range of other countries, including Armenia, Botswana, Costa Rica, and Ivory Coast (Dathan, 2024).

I wondered about the character of and prospects for progressive contextual political philosophy in that context of 'Suella Braverman's dream', where a so-called democratic government openly disregarded its legal obligations, was accused by Human Rights Watch of 'dehumanizing' and 'scapegoating' people seeking asylum (Ahmed, 2022), and in which even incremental 'movement towards justice' with respect to migration and asylum seemed chimerical (p. 5). In short, I was not optimistic about the prospects for this kind of contextual theorising at that time, in that context, if viewed in terms of positive policy impact.

Importantly, Lenard's own 'particular context' in that narrower sense was/is different from mine in various respects. She is based in the Canadian capital, Ottawa. Since 2015 Canada has been governed by the centrist Liberal Party, and was led by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. The Liberal Party in Canada cultivated a far more welcoming response to migration than the Conservative Party in the UK. For example, on World Refugee Day 2023, Trudeau issued a statement that began: 'Everyone deserves a safe place to call home ... We recognize the strength and resilience shown by refugees, and we reaffirm our commitment to welcome and protect them here in Canada.'⁵ That seemed to present a far more favourable environment for incremental movement towards migration-related justice.

Now fast-forward one hundred or so weeks – centuries in politics? – to mid-2025, and the policy environments in the UK and Canada appear completely different. The UK has a Labour government, led by Sir Keir Starmer. In Canada, Justin Trudeau has resigned and has been replaced by Mark Carney. Democratic politics has taken its course and those ‘particular contexts’ have changed. What is more, Donald Trump is back in the White House, the far-right party Alternative für Deutschland has doubled its share of the vote in Germany, Bashar al-Assad’s regime has been overthrown in Syria, and the geopolitical order is undergoing dramatic shocks. No doubt further major shifts will have occurred by the time you read this. Where does that leave Lenard-style contextual political philosophy approaches to migration justice?

3

One possible answer is that we should not overestimate the practical significance of short-term changes in political personnel and in ruling parties. Governments come and go, but other relevant factors have greater staying power. A week may be a long time in ‘everyday’ politics, and yet that might mean little with respect to the underlying structures, processes, and practices that constitute the more general sorts of political ‘constraints’ Lenard may have in mind. Indeed, *those* more fundamental political constraints may share much in common across different jurisdictions. For example, all democratic states must negotiate the many challenges involved in democratic governance, including managing diverse populations with conflicting preferences. Perhaps, then, a Lenard-style contextual approach to the ethics and politics of exclusion need not worry too much about the (relatively minor?) differences between, say, the current politics of migration in the UK and Canada and in other ‘democratic’ countries, and between politics then and politics now.

On the other hand, Lenard emphasises that attentiveness to contextual constraints allows her approach to ‘generate’ the kind of ‘feasible’ policy recommendations that may have purchase ‘now’ (see pp. 12–13). She contrasts this with a less contextual or non-contextual approach:

Rarely will the dilemmas I consider be resolvable with statements decrying the injustice of global migration governance and its colonial roots, or the unfairness of wealth inequalities and their colonial legacies ... Although I am deeply sympathetic to the voices that call for remedies in the form of fully open borders, correctly declaring that ‘no person is illegal,’ the demand to open borders is not often a feasible policy response ... to the cases I examine in this book. (pp.12–13)

In that case, though, it seems that the differences in context, both in terms of place (e.g. UK and Canada – or the US, Germany, Italy, Australia, India and so on ...) and in terms of time (2023, 2025, 20?) may be very significant indeed.

4

This brings me to another key question for political philosophers in general, and for Lenard's contextualist political philosophy in particular. The question is about the intended audience for the work. To whom is it addressed?

Some (many?) philosophers might regard this question as uninteresting, unimportant, or even misguided. For example, consider philosopher of science Philip Kitcher's initial response to the intended audience question. Kitcher reports that when he discusses his philosophical research with a Shakespeare scholar friend of his, the friend often asks: 'so ... who is your audience?' Kitcher goes on:

I hate the question ... I conceive my writing differently. There are ideas and arguments I want to explore, debates I hope to resolve. My first job is to do justice to the ideas and the reasoning. Once I have that straight, I try to make them as clear and as accessible as I can. I would like as many people as possible to gain a better understanding of the issues with which I'm concerned. But the articulation of the ideas, the generation of the understanding comes first. The audience will be determined by my ability, first to figure things out, and second to be as clear as possible about what I've done (Kitcher, 2019, p. 1).

All the same, Kitcher concedes that his friend may 'have a point'. Kitcher then reconstructs and evaluates what he sees as three answers to the question 'who is the audience for work in the philosophy of science?': 1. Philosophers; 2. Scientists; 3. The general public (including journalists and policy-makers) (Kitcher, 2019, p. 2).

Kitcher's question is about philosophy of science and takes an impersonal form: 'who is the audience for work' in that subdiscipline. We could pose the question in a more personal and less prescriptive way, asking ourselves about our own intended audience for our own pieces of writing. I should note right away that one's 'intended audience' might be (is likely to be?) quite different from one's expected and/or one's actual audience. For instance, my attempts to engage a particular audience may fail, and you could underestimate the broader appeal and longevity of your work. In addition, audiences are plural and diverse. We cannot know in advance about the post-publication life of our research. Nevertheless, the answers to the intended audience question will have implications for the research that follows.

5

These days we academics share our research in a variety of formats, from monographs, journal articles, book chapters, conference papers, and seminars, to podcasts, radio and television programmes, op-eds, magazines, pamphlets, and trade books, and even through arts media. We communicate differently depending on the format, and the intended audiences usually differ too. We are already thinking about audiences when we make decisions about formats. The same research might be shared across a range of formats, e.g. in an academic monograph, which is publicised with a blog post and podcast episodes, and then forms the basis for an op-ed.

The dominant formats for research ‘outputs’ in contemporary political philosophy are academic monographs, journal articles, and book chapters. These are the kinds of scholarly publications that are expected of academics, and we must produce such publications in order to obtain, retain, and progress in our jobs. The piece you are reading right now is a contribution to a book symposium published in a scholarly journal, and the book is an academic monograph. The acknowledged primary audience for academic monographs in the arts and humanities is other academics and advanced students in the field and in cognate fields. Some academic monographs become bestsellers beyond the academy but those are the exception rather than the norm.

In short, most authors of academic monographs are not expecting ‘non-academic’ audiences for research published in that format, and the books are usually written primarily for specialist readers. That said, while other academics may be the *primary* intended or expected audience of scholarly publishing, we also may (and often do) intend for the work to reach wider audiences via a range of routes – serendipity, the publisher’s marketing, book reviews and symposia, seminars and lectures publicising it, disseminating it more widely through open access papers and public essays, and so forth. We might also hope our readers will share it with diverse audiences. Students, for example, take their learning with them into their future careers.

Lenard’s expression of ‘hope’ that her ‘analysis will prove genuinely action-guiding in democracies . . .’ (p. 1) and that the approach may ‘generate policy recommendations’ (p. 5) indicates that she is thinking of her audience at least as including people involved in what we might call the policy sphere. While we might not expect (most) politicians to be reading academic monographs as part of their day jobs, it is reasonable to intend for the work to cross their paths in some way.

Notably, the policy sphere broadly construed includes not only members of national governments, but also members of regional and local government, civil servants, NGOs, charities, think tanks, community advocacy groups, and activists. Even those of us in less justice-favourable political

contexts, whose migration-justice work will be of little interest to national politicians, may think of that wider sphere as part of their intended audience.

Moreover, although Lenard emphasises that her prescriptions are directed at audiences 'right now', it is also perfectly sensible for our work to be addressed to audiences further into the future. That seems particularly important in contexts not currently conducive to what the authors see as positive change.

To summarise, our intended audiences may range substantially, from (non-exhaustively) specialist readers in our own fields, and those in cognate disciplines, to students and interested non-specialists, and into public conversation, to the policy sphere, to people here and now and into the future.

6

In section 2 I noted that specifying the relevant context matters, because different policy recommendations will be appropriate in different contexts. Similarly, thinking about the intended audiences question matters, because it helps us to see the value of various different approaches to political philosophy. For example, even in 'hostile environment' contexts, although policy-makers may have little interest in progress towards migration justice and our work may have limited if any purchase in that domain, we may intend for our readership to extend well beyond those involved in national politics. Even more optimistically, since our intended audience often is not (or is not only) current policy makers, I think we have licence to theorise in ways far *less* constrained by the prospects for the uptake of our analyses by those in positions of power here and now. To end on a positive note, I am convinced that it is reasonable for us to think not just about incremental change in the direction of justice but also to think big. In my view, we can intend for our research to offer imaginative visions for the future; to seek to inspire our audiences to see that better alternatives can be constructed; and to maintain hope that we can work towards deep, structural change. Despite the hostile climate, that remains *my* dream.

Notes

1. See for example the discussion in Jonathan Wolff (2011).
2. On the 'hostile environment policy', see Taylor (2018).
3. See the full list of Home Office responsibilities on its website (Home Office, n.d.)
4. See the news story (Dearden, 2022); and the interview (PoliticsJOE, 2022).
5. See the full statement: <https://www.pm.gc.ca/en/news/statements/2023/06/20/statement-prime-minister-world-refugee-day#:~:text=The%20Prime%20Minister%2C%20Justin%20Trudeau,protect%20them%20here%20in%20Canada.>

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Sarah Fine is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Cambridge, and a Fellow of Corpus Christi College. She specialises in issues related to migration, borders, and citizenship, and methodology in political philosophy. She is also interested in work connecting philosophy with the arts.

ORCID

Sarah Fine  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9582-2917>

References

- Ahmed, Y. (2022, November 2). Divisive rhetoric in UK emboldens extremists, endangers asylum seekers. *Human rights watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/11/02/divisive-rhetoric-uk-emboldens-extremists-endangers-asylum-seekers>
- Cohen, G. A. (2004). A truth in conservatism: Rescuing conservatism from the Conservatives. [unpublished manuscript]. All Souls College.
- Dathan, M. (2024, April 15). Revealed: UK targets four countries for Rwanda deal. *The Times*. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/uk-talks-rwanda-deal-other-nations-countries-zr9nxmlnp>
- Dearden, L. (2022, October 5). Suella Braverman says it is her ‘dream’ and ‘obsession’ to see a flight take asylum seekers to Rwanda. *The Independent*. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/suella-braverman-rwanda-dream-obsession-b2195296.html>
- Home Office. (n.d.). About Us. <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/home-office/about>
- Kitcher, P. (2019). “So . . . who is your audience?”. *European Journal for Philosophy of Science*, 9(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13194-018-0227-3>
- Politics JOE. (2022, October 8). Home Secretary “dreams” of deporting asylum seekers to Rwanda. *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D-BpOsjEqs>
- Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Act. (2024). C. 8. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/58-04/0038/230038.pdf>
- Taylor, R. (2018). *Impact of ‘hostile environment’ policy*. House of Lords Library. <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/lln-2018-0064/>
- Wolff, J. (2011). *Ethics and public policy: A philosophical inquiry*. Routledge.