After Rights?
Politics, Ethics, Aesthetics

Call for Papers
for a project and workshop series leading to a peer-reviewed journal special issue

Deadline for Abstract Submission: 30 June 2021

Societies and publics in diverse political spaces are today confronted with social and political milieus that are ‘intentionally devoid of everything that a person needs to live’ (Bradley, 2019: 137). Such ‘hostile environments’ form spaces of abandonment, debility and rightlessness, the result of the confluence of ongoing colonial legacies and neoliberal capitalism (El-Enany 2020). We are thus witnessing the coexistence of effective rightlessness, disposability and socio-economic abandonment alongside human rights abundance and expansion (Gundogdu, 2015). These differently manifesting socio-economic and political landscapes, butressed by the rise of right-wing populism and regressive political formations, have fuelled the concerns of resistance movements and critical rights scholars about the limits and boundaries of struggling through rights. Such concerns include, but are not limited to, consideration of the limitations of rights and indeed of their prospective complicity in producing processes of abandonment, precarity and debility that create effectively rightless subjects (Brown 2004; Sokhi-Bulley 2016; Tronto, 2012). To date, scholarship and social justice activism have questioned the reliance of human rights on restrictive, racialized notions of humanity, rationality and purposive agency, asking whether rights reverberate – historically and philosophically – with the racial and extractive legacies of empire (Gilroy 2019; Tascon and Ife 2008), thereby reinforcing colonial and settler colonial politics of recognition (Coulthard 2014). Questions abound, moreover, about how and whether human rights work, whether rights are enough and whether rights are at an endtimes (Sikkink, 2017; Moyn 2018; Hopgood 2013). Whether, and in what ways, rights function as technologies of governing and managing populations (Sokhi-Bulley 2016; Golder 2015; Kapur 2018), sometimes in conjunction with other assemblages such as ‘debility’ (Puar 2017) or ‘crisis’ (Bhambra 2017). Whether still, contrary to many 20th century expectations, rights may not be the antidote to rightlessness (Odysseos 2015) and may indeed signal the end of imagination (Douzinas 2000) or its curtailment within a ‘neoliberal fishbowl’ (Kapur, 2016). And, whether struggling (through) rights encloses struggles for transformational change within a politics of optimism that secures not only the material and exclusionary status quo but also its pervasive anti-blackness (Warren 2018).

These conjunctures prompt the central questions of this project:
• Can we, and should we, imagine an ‘after rights’?
• What comes ‘after rights’?
• What are the political, ethical and aesthetic/poetic implications of thinking ‘after rights’?

The project and envisioned journal Special Issue invite submissions by critical rights scholars in diverse career stages and disciplinary locations, as well as from a range of theoretical and ethico-political sensibilities. We aim to jointly interrogate both the failings in the promises of liberal conceptions of rights arising from the wide-ranging critiques mentioned above, and also co-produce work with struggles and social formations striving for alternative futures,
including radical reimaginations of human rights. We encourage submissions that entwine the analyses of disposability, abandonment and effective rightlessness; that reflect on the polysemic meanings of the after in ‘after rights?’, where ‘after’ takes on a range of meanings as a move beyond, a radical reimagining, and a space of practice and possibility to remake rights otherwise. We want to encourage re-conceptualisations of critique beyond philosophical intervention, as entailing questioning of political engagement, ethical comportment, social poesis, as well as spirituality (Hartman 2019; Foucault, 2001; Hadot, 1995). We envision, in other words, that proposed papers will aim to stretch the political, ethical, aesthetic / poetic imagination of what plural futures of rights might look like. We invite both theoretical and practice- and/or case-study based contributions offering radical reflections on what ‘after rights’ might come to mean in philosophical and praxeological terms. The papers are thus intended to form a collection of radical interventions that respond to our times and may address wide-ranging issues, such as climate change, Israeli apartheid and the Palestinian calls for freedom, indigenous politics and resurgence, the Farmers Protests in India, the UK’s hostile environment (including issues of deprivation of citizenship, deportation and expulsion), Covid-19 and racial capitalism, as well as Fourth World struggles for material and structural change, amongst others.

Much critical thinking in these directions is currently ongoing and is vital to shaping our understanding of both reimaginations of human rights and reflections on the meaning and possibilities of the ‘after’ outside of juridico-liberal frameworks. Such work has focused rethinking rights in alternative terms, through divergent temporal horizons, exploring enhanced poetic and relational possibilities; resistive practices of self-formation and performativity that would reimagine human rights away from the political and ethical frameworks of a market society (Bhambra 2017; Coulthard 2014; El-Enany, 2020; Gilroy 2019; Golder 2015; Hadot 1995; Haraway 2016; Hopgood 2013; Kapur 2018; Lefebvre 2018; Madhok 2017; McNeilly 2016; Mignolo 2014; Moyn 2018; Odysseos 2015; Puar 2017; Sikkink 2017; Sokhi-Bulley 2016; Tascón and Ife 2008; Tronto 2012; Whyte 2019; Zivi 2012).

Extending and critically interrogating ongoing work, as well as forging new directions, we encourage contributions engaging with, but not limited to, the following questions:

- In what ways and with what resources do we imagine possibilities of ‘after rights’?
- What political, ethical, aesthetic / poetic imaginations could inform what plural futures of rights might look like?
- What might ‘after rights’ come to mean in philosophical and praxeological terms?
- Does thinking of ‘after rights’ require of us to unlearn existing forms of praxis and struggle with, over and beyond rights?
- In what ways does questioning what comes ‘after rights’ refer to alternative forms of political engagement, ethical comportment, social poesis, as well as spirituality?
- How can we radically reimagine other futures, languages, meanings and praxes of rights in order to respond to the legacies and present conditions of disposability and rightlessness?

Our own motivation as convenors of this project and guest editors / curators of the resulting Special Issue derives from dissatisfaction in writing and teaching within and against the confines of liberal rights frameworks, and a desire and ‘response-ability’ (Haraway 2016: 3) to stay with the challenge posed by the possibilities of ‘after rights’.

This project involves a series of workshops leading to a journal special issue. The workshops will be the main form of engagement amongst project participants and will also serve the purpose of providing authors with concerted feedback on individual work, as well as
ensuring that the overall project is cohesive. Possible target journals for the Special Issue are, inter alia, *International Journal of Human Rights; Humanity Journal; Theory, Culture and Society; Journal of Human Rights, Interventions: Journal of Postcolonial Studies.*

**Project Convenors and Guest-Editors**
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**Timeline**

**30 June 2021**: Deadline for submission of abstracts. Abstracts, including a working title, should be 250-300 words and be emailed to both editors. Successful contributions will be notified in July 2021.

**15 October 2021**: Draft papers due. Authors will be invited to present their draft papers in a rolling series of online workshops between October 2021-February 2022. The workshops will be jointly hosted by the Sussex Rights and Justice Centre and Sussex Critical Theory Research Cluster.

**End-March 2022**: Final, revised papers due.

Please do get in touch if you are interested in the project but would discuss deadlines or have any other queries.

**References**


