

MSU GPC 2024 Program

Philosophy, Practice, and Crisis

Deadline for RSVP:
Friday,
March 8th

Link to RSVP:
<http://tinyurl.com/GPC24-RSVP>

Saturday, March 23 | C201 Snyder Hall | <http://tinyurl.com/GPC24-Zoom>

8:45 - 9:00 **WELCOME**

9:00 - 9:30 **Giannis Vassilopoulos**, "Philosophy in the Public Turmoil: A Case for a Civically Engaged Public Philosophy"

9:35 - 10:05 **Gabrielle Bussell**, "Toward Sex Trade Abolition: A Marxist Feminist Critique of Lori Watson's Defense of the Nordic Model"

10:10 - 10:40 **Shayna Federico**, "Reading Spinoza's *Ethics* as an Ecology: The Irrationality of Environmental Domination Amidst the Contemporary Climate Crisis"

10:55 - 11:25 **Robert Kippes**, "Antimoralism, Justification, and Utopianism"

11:30 - 12:00 **Ethan Gettes**, "The Fractured Totality: Situating Benjamin's Philosophy of History with Hegel and Lukács"

12:05 - 12:35 **David Suell**, "Untimely Continuities: Nyerere and Cabral on Politicizing History for Socialist Strategy"

12:35 - 1:50 **LUNCH**

1:50 -
3:05



KEYNOTE SPEAKER

DR. STEPHEN FERGUSON II

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, North Carolina State University

**"'Another World Is Possible':
Doing Political Philosophy After Rawls"**

3:20 - 3:50 **Armaan Ahmed**, "The 'Mother' of All Disciplines: Towards a Philosophy of Inspiration"

3:55 - 4:25 **Rebecca Valeriano-Flores**, "Critical Philosophy and Community-Based Research on Incarceration in Illinois"

4:30 - 5:00 **Gabriel Nyberg**, "Objectivity and Activist Research: What can Philosophers Add?"

5:15 - 6:30 **PHILOSOPHY IN PRACTICE WORKSHOP**

I - Gabrielle Bussell, Robert Kippes, Ethan Gettes,
Rebecca Valeriano-Flores

II - Shayna Federico, David Suell, Armaan Ahmed, Gabriel Nyberg



CRITICAL THEORY WORKSHOP

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MSU GPC 2024 Program

Philosophy, Practice, and Crisis

Saturday, March 23 | C201 Snyder Hall | <http://tinyurl.com/GPC24-Zoom>

9:00-9:30 **Giannis Vassilopoulos**, Georgia State University, "Philosophy in the Public Turmoil: A Case for a Civically Engaged Public Philosophy" (*online*)

Public philosophers usually share a common goal: to bridge the gap that separates academic philosophy and the general public. However, their approaches can vary widely. In this paper, I contend that public philosophy often errs by misunderstanding the term 'public' in 'public philosophy.' Specifically, the public is usually identified solely by its exclusion from academic philosophy, rather than being recognized as the society of a philosopher's fellow citizens. Following this misunderstanding, public philosophy is being practiced as an enterprise of popularizing technical academic work for that excluded 'public,' i.e., the philosophically untrained. This model, which I will refer to as the "Public Outreach Model," focuses primarily on the public outreach of academic philosophy as it is now practiced and neglects the active role philosophers can assume in public affairs and the transformative potential of philosophy in public life. In this paper, I will propose an alternative framework for understanding public philosophy, labeled the "Civically Engaged Model." Under this model, philosophers are not mere mediators but rather act as public intellectuals who actively engage in public discourse on social and political matters, aiming to make philosophy not only accessible but also relevant to the public. In doing so, I will also defend my proposal against the claim that such an endeavor constitutes a form of pure activism. I will argue that philosophy at large, including public philosophy, can maintain its epistemic potential to contribute effectively to public affairs as a civically engaged philosophical practice, without any need to be declared activism. Philosophers, too, can argue for social and political issues that fall within their area of expertise without a need to escape the bounds of their philosophical activity or step into those of pure activism.

9:35-10:05 **Gabrielle Bussell**, Michigan State University, "Toward Sex Trade Abolition: A Marxist Feminist Critique of Lori Watson's Defense of the Nordic Model"

In her book titled *Debating Sex Work* alongside Jessica Flanigan, Lori Watson defends the Nordic Model, a sex-equality approach to policy surrounding prostitution. With the goal of abolishing the sex trade, this model aims to remedy the social inequalities that drive the demand for prostituted people by decriminalizing the selling of sex and criminalizing buyers and pimps (Watson 19). This model also entails providing social services to prostituted people as a way of ensuring their right to exit the trade alongside public education campaigns whose aim is to expose the harms associated with prostitution (Watson 130). Watson notes that, while there have been various approaches to reducing the demand for prostitution (such as community service, public shaming, surveillance, and public education programs), none of these approaches are as effective as criminal sanctions for buyers, including jail time and large fines (Watson 142). In this paper, I will offer three potential objections to Watson's defense of the Nordic Model: First, as long as severe class inequality exists, the most powerful men in society will continue to have unfettered access to working class women and other gender oppressed people's bodies regardless of policy change. Watson's liberal egalitarian approach alongside her defense of the Nordic Model, then, does not adequately tend to class oppression and its role in perpetuating the sex trade. Second, buyers who are most likely to face criminal punishment are those who are most vulnerable to the harms associated with policing and incarceration. Additionally, the criminalization of sex buying exposes sex workers to potentially harmful police interactions and incarceration for other offenses. This model, then, risks the exposure of vulnerable groups to further systematic harms. Finally, the policy changes associated...

(continued on page 3)

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with this model do not address the class and gender inequalities that a) force or coerce women and gendered oppressed people into the sex trade and b) drive men to purchase sex and engage in sexual violence toward women and gender oppressed people in the first place. Thus, I will argue, Watson's commitment to liberal egalitarianism and sole focus on policy change via the Nordic Model does not adequately address the conditions that give rise to the sex trade and, in doing so, her account risks perpetuating certain social inequalities despite attempts to mitigate them. I will conclude my paper by arguing that, in the quest for sex trade abolition, one's political commitments must aim to eliminate the systemic inequalities that have created a class of women and gender oppressed people who are forced to resort to selling their bodies out of economic desperation. In addition to feminism and anti-racism, these commitments must be anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist and they must also include the abolition of police and prisons. This means we must look to alternatives to dominant forms of criminal punishment and policing which further entrench social inequalities. I argue that policy change alone cannot usher us toward sex trade abolition. We must also call for the abolition of the overarching social, political, and economic systems of power and domination that have created the material conditions that demand a reserve of women and gender oppressed people's bodies for men's sexual pleasure.

10:10-10:40 **Shayna Federico**, Villanova University, "Reading Spinoza's Ethics as an Ecology: The Irrationality of Environmental Domination Amidst the Contemporary Climate Crisis" (*online*)

The metaphysics that Baruch Spinoza offers throughout his infamous *Ethics* places humans as one mode among many expressions of an infinite substance – God, or Nature – leading many to interpret this text as an anti-anthropocentric rejection of traditional humanism. And yet, Spinoza's remarks on "beasts," or animals, at times verge on pejorative, even as he declares that humans do not exist above other parts of Nature. This ecology is most often taken to two extremes: that of the Deep Ecology Movement (which uses Spinoza as a philosophical anchor to advocate for a political platform in which "humans radically limit their impact upon other life forms through, for example, aiming to decrease our population," despite this contradicting much of Spinoza's account of human-animal relations in the *Ethics* itself) and of philosophers like Hasana Sharp and Genevieve Lloyd (both of whom, in different ways, conclude that Spinoza's ecology does not offer much in terms of sympathizing with the plight of nonhuman animals, nor the state of our environment at large). In this paper, I argue that, despite the ambiguity of Spinoza's comments on animals vis-à-vis humans, his overall ecology permits at least some scenarios in which it is or can be rational for humans not to dominate animals, even if one does not have a moral obligation towards them. In reinterpreting Spinoza's ecology amidst the contemporary climate crisis, I argue that humans ought not to dominate our environment but rather ought to act in ways which recognize that our ability to strive to persevere (or, *conare*) as a means of attaining an intellectual love of God is bound up with that of nonhuman animals within our interdependent ecosystem. Since the advent and acceleration of the climate crisis – which differs drastically from the relationship between human and the environment in which Spinoza was writing pre-Industrial Revolution – I hope the view I offer here takes on new meaning, urgency, and accuracy which allows us to better realize the ways in which human striving is bound up with other parts of nature, and, in doing so, can advance Spinoza scholarship forward while also remaining faithful to his Early Modern metaphysical commitments.

10:55-11:25 **Robert Kippes**, Binghamton University, "Antimoralism, Justification, and Utopianism"

In this paper I probe the limits of anti-moralism as an anti-utopian methodology for political theory. I argue that anti-moralist ideas are given normative justification only by a presupposed moralist conviction that transcends the given material and social circumstances that ought to normatively ground their ideas. Moralism is an approach to morality more generally that
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advocates the strongest possible normativity of moral ideas and principles, regardless of any practical concerns. Political moralism argues morality is methodologically primary to politics and other practical contexts. Anti-moralism, is an approach to political theorizing that rejects the utopianism of moralism for two main reasons. First, as Political Realists argue, there is a distinct sphere of politics that is not reducible to morality. And second, practice is always primary for the generation and normative justification of ideas. For example, Karl Marx argues if political, revolutionary action is to be achieved, and if philosophy is to play any role, it is not in the distanced, reflectively impartial role that so often encapsulates philosophic and academic thinking. Rather, political theory must be reflective of the historical contradictions of social, material life such that it does not come before politics but is instead a component of it. But what, then, constitutes the normativity of the anti-moralist's theory – and Marx's revolutionary theory in particular? Without presupposing the normativity of their ideas, going beyond the social and material circumstances at hand, there can be no normative justification. This is the conundrum: only those ideas which are perceived to be universally transcendent are normatively motivating, and yet the anti-moralist is aware, at least provisionally, that no idea is actually universally transcendent. This does not mean that moralism, by default, is correct. Moralism ideas remain ideological. Rather, my point is to contest the extent to which anti-moralism can be non-moralist. If my thesis is correct, then anti-moralists ought to contingently engage in moral theorizing without falling into moralism – though the risk is ultimately inescapable.

11:30-12:00 **Ethan Gettes**, Fordham University, "The Fractured Totality: Situating Benjamin's Philosophy of History with Hegel and Lukács" (*online*)

Walter Benjamin forces social scientists, political activists, and philosophers to reevaluate a question of mutual interest: What does it mean to engage with history? Benjamin's supposed answer to this question is one of fragmentation; at every attempt to universalize and totalize, the historical materialist must enter in order to shatter the fictitious whole. In this sense, we are encouraged to read Benjamin as thoroughly anti-Hegelian, where the purpose of the philosophy is not to unify history under a ruling principle of reason but is instead to foreground the potential for genuine novelty in historical development. We find forms of this reading in prominent Critical Theory scholars, namely Susan Buck-Morss, Martin Jay, Gillian Rose, and to a lesser extent, Richard Wolin. While this characterization is not entirely incorrect, I find the stark opposition between Benjamin and universality to be troubling. It is undeniable that the ideas of universality and totality—particularly as used in Lukács' Hegelian-Marxist History and Class Consciousness—play a non-negligible role in Benjamin's intellectual development. Yet perhaps more contentiously, I posit that Benjamin's philosophy of history does not merely flirt with the idea of totality but is, in fact, a philosophy of totality par excellence. Benjamin, far from being a thinker of pure fragmentation, maintains fidelity to universal history. The verdict on Benjamin's relationship with totality—and thus of universal history—is important for a few reasons. First, on an exegetical level, it dictates how one situates Benjamin with the Marxist and German Idealist traditions, bringing him away from the title of poststructuralism's forebearer. Further, coming to grips with the function of totality influences our engagements with history both as a discipline and as a means for political action. If we are to posit the existence of universal history, then what does it mean to grasp a moment of genuine novelty in historical development? How does one situate crises in a historical framework? I believe that Benjamin can help us answer these questions. Benjamin's universal history, rather than being a purely retrospective historical theodicy à la Hegel, is a universality that is won in the liberation of the oppressed classes. Thus, Benjamin gives us a form of historical thinking—remembrance—that eliminates the distinction between theoretical historical knowledge and practical political action. To remember the totality of history, according to Benjamin, is to be engaged in the political struggles of the present and vice versa. We must not surrender universal history to the idealists nor to the reactionaries. Benjamin's unique conception of history, rather than being opposed to universal history, is a reclaiming of totality in the name of the oppressed.

12:05-12:35 **David Suell**, University of Michigan, “Untimely Continuities: Nyerere and Cabral on Politicizing History for Socialist Strategy”

Recent research has identified how systems of domination rely upon accounts of historical time that naturalize and sustain such domination, provoking the question of what competing conceptions of time and history might underpin emancipatory alternatives. In response to many contemporary crises, leftist thinkers have emphasized a politics of rupture while ceding the “use and abuse of history” to right-wing actors who gain populist traction through appeals to tradition. In this paper, I argue that we can look to anticolonial nation-building movements to fight on this terrain of temporality toward socialist, democratic futures. I develop this argument through a close reading of work by Julius Nyerere and Amílcar Cabral. Though rarely read together, I show how these two thinkers each interpreted emancipatory politics as an effort to articulate a coherent relationship between policy and historical continuity. They did so by unsettling blunt divisions between “traditionalism” and “modernism” and by firmly characterizing historical motion as a product of human intervention. Following these two thinkers, I articulate a theory of history that demonstrates how politics must and can go beyond addressing immediate crises or articulating temporary solidarities for a specific moment. I call this alternative the cultivation of “untimely continuities.” I interpret Nyerere’s and Cabral’s work to articulate three features of this alternative politics and demonstrate its strategic value. First, I explain how, especially in conditions of crisis, the creation of historical continuity is itself a political challenge that these thinkers addressed through local practices and collective memory. Second, I show how national policies and international ties should be developed with this challenge in mind by articulating a relationship between historical narratives and popular culture. Third, I propose that those first two features of making history and shaping culture help people to step out of our own timely concerns and material interests in service to ideals of a different, aspirational, social order. Nyerere’s and Cabral’s projects show how claims of continuity, rather than just a form of traditionalism, can shape an “untimely” politics that reveals and enables emancipatory possibilities.

1:50 -
3:05



KEYNOTE SPEAKER

DR. STEPHEN FERGUSON II

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, North Carolina State University

“‘Another World Is Possible’:

Doing Political Philosophy After Rawls”


I explore the conceptual and methodological limitations of contemporary political philosophy as it has developed in the aftermath of John Rawls. One of the conceptual limitations I discuss is the absence of a substantive discussion of revolution. I begin by challenging the normative presuppositions of contemporary political philosophy, for example, its commitment to either Rawlsian liberalism or Nozick’s libertarianism. If Rawls or Nozick are the presumptive context for doing contemporary political philosophy, I argue, then capitalism—despite being the material cause of slavery, racism, Jim Crow segregation, gentrification, and poverty—functions as a presumptive context for the solution to any and all social and political problems. Therefore, political philosophers—particularly in the African American tradition—will never attempt to develop a philosophy of revolution which sees the need to go beyond capitalism. I argue that revolutions are (1) a historical process driven by class antagonism, (2) in which one ruling class is displaced by another, and (3) which produces a social transformation in the “productive capacities” and “social progressive potentialities” of society at large. Moreover, the justification for revolution cannot be based on moral outrage. Moral concepts and judgments play an explanatory role, but they are subordinate to social theory. Only a concrete analysis of concrete conditions can provide the rationale or justification for revolution.

3:20-3:50 **Armaan Ahmed**, Stony Brook University, "The 'Mother' of All Disciplines: Towards a Philosophy of Inspiration"

Philosophy at its best is not a building, nor a wrecking ball, but a packet of seeds. Philosophy at its best does not stop at description and prescription; it goes beyond—it inspires new thought. We have learned, after thousands of years and thousands of thinkers, that any sort of philosophical arrival is either not possible, or not worthwhile. Even physics, after the quantum, isn't a closed loop. A cynic might ask, after cycles of construction and deconstruction, where is philosophy going? What is the use of neuron-frying theory if it all comes crumbling down after another generation? Thus the question must be asked at present, as it has been asked a million times: what should philosophy do? Philosophy has been termed "the Mother of All Disciplines"—I propose we take this metaphor more literally. Philosophy is not "the building in which all other disciplines live." Such a characterization would not only be presumptuous—a not at all motherly characteristic—it would miss philosophy's most potent force: inspiration. Rather philosophy should be thought of not as the building or its rubble, but the reverberations radiating outward through the ground from both. Or even, the raw materials others use for their own construction. Concepts themselves aren't enough, they must themselves make new ones possible. A caring mother does not deposit concepts into a child like money into a bank, but creates a nurturing environment in which they can grow, plants a seed and cares for it, lets it seek its own sun. I submit that philosophy must leverage its inspirational capacity in the literal sense (to breathe into—to give life to), an element of philosophical writing that is too often considered superfluous. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's 1000 Plateaus, I demonstrate that philosophy can not only outline and propose solutions to crisis, but can shape the aesthetics of crisis-ridden thought—its texture, viscosity, shade, and shape. Thought itself is a practice, and one in need of a theory as much as any other. Inspiration is a pedagogy for thought. Brian Massumi wrote in the introduction to the book "The question is not: is it true? But: does it work? What new thoughts does it make it possible to think? What new emotions does it make it possible to feel? What new sensations and perceptions does it open in the body?" Their book has had so many unexpected applications throughout the thought and practice throughout myriads of disciplines that it has become a sort of medium for interdisciplinarity. It has become a packet of seeds. Incorporating some of my favorite philosophical prose from the likes of the most elusive and lucid writers (from Bachelard to Meister Eckhart to Camus to Merleau-Ponty), I will demonstrate my point in real-time. If philosophy is to have the most radical staying power and perversity it is capable of, it must, like my mother, not only gift the next generation a gem—solid and crystalline—but give it the capacity to find more, to form more.

3:55-4:25 **Rebecca Valeriano-Flores**, Loyola University Chicago, "Critical Philosophy and Community-Based Research on Incarceration in Illinois"

In this presentation, I explain how I use critical phenomenology and critical theory to guide my work on a community-based, participatory action research (CBPAR) and archiving project on the carceral practice of civil commitment, the indefinite detainment of people with sex offenses after they've served their prison term. The only pathway to release is by progression through levels of psychiatric rehabilitation, but because of inadequate treatment and therapy, very few people are released. Our queer- and survivor-led research collective conducted the only community-based, participatory action research (CBPAR) study in the U.S. on civil commitment. CBPAR is a practice and epistemology that intends to avoid the objectification, exploitation, and reproduction of oppressive structures of institutional research. Phenomenology, in a simple definition, "brackets" the natural-scientific way of seeing the world to explore first-person experience and uncover the conditions which make experience possible. Critical phenomenologists claim that traditional phenomenology leaves out the experiences of people from marginalized groups, which perpetuates marginalization and leave gaps in our accounts of subjectivity. While phenomenology allows us to develop more robust theories of subjectivity, and philosophers such as Lisa Guenther
(continued on page 7)



call for building a social movement of resistance to oppression, there is always the risk of exploiting and objectifying the experiences of marginalized people to further our philosophical knowledge. CBPAR incorporates resistance into research by building community and allowing people from marginalized groups to take part in the ways we see them and understand them. The second method I use is philosophical “archaeology,” drawn from the work of Foucault. By looking at artifacts within archives, we arrive at the concept of the Archive, a system of scattered, anonymous structures, knowledge, and power that govern our frameworks of knowledge and discourse for a particular domain. However, Saidya Hartman claims that the Archive dominates the narratives of violence and resistance, such as those of the enslavement of Black people in the U.S. In imaginatively telling the stories of Black women and others derived from archival fragments, the authority of the Archive becomes a blip among the noise of alternate narratives, and the fragments themselves can be imagined as resistant objects. Community-based archiving contributes to our theories of subjectivity by providing a diversity of experiences. Beyond the violence that dominates the narratives of people who are incarcerated, we also see joy and resistance in these spaces: we understand artifacts as resistant objects, not only in their content and context, but by virtue of their existence outside of the prison institution and archive institution. Community-based archiving is a decentralizing, deinstitutionalizing process: the archive is acquired by consent of the community, surveyed and catalogued by a rotating cast of volunteers, and kept in physical locations outside of institutions. Through CBPAR and archiving, we challenge our notions of safety, deviance, treatment, and punishment that stigmatize this extremely marginalized group and subjects them to carceral violence. By putting these methods into practice, we transform our research into political and social action.

4:30-5:00 **Gabriel Nyberg**, University of California, San Diego, “Objectivity and Activist Research: What can Philosophers Add?”

To do something about crises, we must ensure that we have accurate information about them. This is the purpose of what I call activist research – scientific inquiry undertaken to help achieve some political goal, broadly construed. Activist research is frequently criticized for failing to be sufficiently objective. Scholars frequently worry that research conducted with the explicit purpose to further a political aim comes with worries about bias risks, i.e. designing one’s inquiry in such a way that one’s results are likely to be distorted by biases like wishful thinking and failing to detect cognitive blind spots. This observation about bias in activist research is particularly salient given a seeming majority view in the literature on values in science – scientific inquiry, particularly in the behavioral, medical, and social sciences, is impossible to make value-free. Evidential standards, choice of concepts, hypothesis framing and so on are necessarily laden with choices of social, moral, and political values, the argument goes. In effect, picking a particular constellation of social, moral, and political values can have an impact on which candidate hypothesis gets picked out of a set of plausible alternatives. Had we chosen a different set of values, we would have ended up picking a different hypothesis as true. As an upshot, activist research tightly knit to a particular value constellation might just end up being unconvincing to somebody not sharing the activist’s bundle of values. This presentation will examine how philosophers can evaluate, improve and learn from research with an activist bent. I argue that philosophers knowledgeable in history, philosophy of science, political philosophy, ethics and epistemology are well-situated to analyse this type of research. Activist research involves value-judgments, standards for knowledge, and norms of inquiry, which is a daunting complex to navigate. The multitudes of different types of normativity involved – epistemic, moral, political, aesthetics, and those pertaining to the aims of inquiry – and the particular type of focus philosophers place on analysing these forms of normativity and how they come together gives the interested philosopher an analytic advantage to understand how these factors come together and influences research. Similarly, this feature of activist research makes it a rich area for finding case studies and tests for philosophical theories. For this reason, instances and episodes of such research is a fertile ground to learn from and refine our understanding of inquiry and objectivity.

5:15-6:30 **PHILOSOPHY IN PRACTICE WORKSHOP**

Conference presenters and MSU Philosophy graduate students and faculty are invited to attend this capstone workshop focused on the role of philosophy in practice responding to crisis. In facilitated small and large group discussions, participants will workshop presenters' contributions and conference themes through the lens of engaged philosophy. Beyond philosophical enthusiasm, no special preparation is required.

I - Gabrielle Bussell, Robert Kippes, Ethan Gettes, Rebecca Valeriano-Flores

II - Shayna Federico, David Suell, Armaan Ahmed, Gabriel Nyberg

Conference Organizers: Reese Haller | Matt Kelley | Rebecca Pincus

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