Editorial

In lieu of an editorial for this issue, we interviewed our new Editor-in-Chief, Laurence Piper. In this brief conversation, he talks about his history with the journal as an editor, plans for his tenure as Editor-in-Chief, and the evolving role of the journal in the field of social and political theory, globally.

Theoria: To begin, when did you join the journal, and what roles have you taken over the years?

Laurence: My relationship with Theoria goes back now over 20 years. I am not sure exactly when I joined the editorial team, but it was over two decades ago. Essentially it began once I returned to South Africa after completing my PhD at the University of Cambridge; I began to work at the then-University of Natal (Pieternaritzburg), now the University of KwaZulu Natal, and I was recruited by Raphael de Kadt, who was the Editor-in-Chief at that time and had also been my mentor for my undergraduate studies at the University of Natal.

Initially my role was more of an apprenticeship in becoming a journal editor than anything else, but after a few years I became the Reviews Editor of the journal and I remember being very busy soliciting, organising and encouraging reviewers. After that I became a more of an established editor at the journal, especially after Raphael de Kadt retired and Lawrence Hamilton took over as Editor-in-Chief. I am now the longest serving active editor of Theoria. That said, we are very fortunate that both the former Editors-in-Chief continue on the editorial board in emeritus roles. In addition, I think it’s important to mention the critical role played by Roger Deacon who was the managing editor of Theoria for over a decade and was the organising force that drove the journal forward, particularly in its growing years. He too remains an active participant.
on the editorial board and an invaluable source of institutional and organisational knowledge.

My role in *Theoria* has taken on a more substantial dimension in the last five years, as the journal became formally affiliated with APTA, which is the Association for Political Thought in Africa. Lawrence Hamilton and I currently serve as the two directors of APTA. When Lawrence Hamilton’s two terms as Editor-in-Chief came to an end in 2022, I applied for the position and was fortunate enough to secure it. I feel privileged to be the Editor-in-Chief of *Theoria*, not just because it is a good journal but because I have witnessed first-hand the perseverance and dedication that has gone into building the journal to where it is today. I look forward to continuing in this tradition as I lead the editorial committee in strengthening the journal into the future.

*Theoria*: Speaking of looking to the future and building on the foundations that have been laid, how would you characterise the nature of the journal, and how has this shifted over the years?

 Laurence: *Theoria* has the rare distinction of being the oldest continuously published Humanities journal in South Africa, starting in the 1930s. In its current form *Theoria* has existed as a journal of social and political theory since the 1990s. I think we can divide the history of the journal into four phases. The first phase of the journal refers to its existence as an in-house journal of the Faculty of Humanities at the then-University of Natal. It is important to understand the context of Apartheid to better understand the nature of the journal. During the height of Apartheid in the 1970s and 1980s, South Africa was rightly part of an international cultural and academic boycott that cut off academic life from the rest of the world. Consequently, in a relatively isolated academic environment, the in-house journal was developed as a way for academics to publish and share their work. Given that it was the journal for the whole faculty, the substantive focus was quite broad as well.

With the advent of democracy in South Africa in 1994, the academic boycott was lifted and South Africa who rejoined the international community in multiple ways. This was the moment that Raphael de Kadt, or Raph as we know him, took over as Editor-in-Chief of the journal, sensing an opportunity or perhaps sensing
that the time for a wide-ranging in-house journal had passed. This marked the beginning of the second phase of Theoria. He decided to refocus Theoria as a journal for social and political theory, ably supported by Roger Deacon, and they, with a team of editors, spent over a decade building the journal into a nationally accredited and internationally recognised journal. This included increasing the number of annual editions of the journal from two to four editions per year over a 10-year period, as well as securing national accreditation in South Africa and listing on several international indices. A key move made during this phase was to secure Berghahn Journals in New York as the publisher for Theoria – we continue to work with them to this day.

I don’t think readers should underestimate the amount of work involved in building a journal up from nothing. This was a tremendous organisational achievement as well as a tremendous testimony to Raph’s standing as a scholar. It was really through his personal knowledge and networks that he was able to build the journal. To me, Raph’s leadership can be summarised in the idea of bringing the world to South Africa, and he was tremendously successful in the early days in securing contributions to Theoria from leading scholars globally, such as Seyla Benhabib, Christopher Norris, David Held, Jürgen Habermas, Claus Offe and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who all published in Theoria in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

The third phase of the journal began with the editorship of Lawrence Hamilton, who built on Raph de Kadt’s legacy by extending the international profile of Theoria. If Raph’s approach was to bring the world to South Africa, Lawrence’s approach was much more about bringing South Africa and Africa to the world. In this phase we saw a shift in Theoria where the objective was to amplify the voices in the journal of scholars from the global South and Africa, in particular. In addition, Lawrence did a remarkable job in improving the organisational capacity of the journal through recruiting a number of younger, energetic scholars onto the editorial board. Perhaps the greatest achievement, however, has been that Theoria became Open Access in 2020, which has had a dramatic impact both in its accessibility and in the enthusiasm by emerging and established scholars to publish in the journal. To my mind, the work undertaken in this phase has left Theoria well poised to become a significant political theory voice on the international stage.
You mentioned four phases of the journal – do you see your tenure as the fourth phase? What is your vision and hope for this next period in the life and growth of the journal?

Laurence: Yes, I would say that this is the start of phase four. My vision is to continue to build the identity of Theoria as an international journal that bridges North and South, developed and developing worlds, by ensure that there is a consistent African emphasis in Theoria’s special issues, as well as in its contributors and reviewers. In addition, I think we could do more to include scholars from elsewhere in the global South. For example, in my own field of urban politics some of the leading theorists are from India and Brazil. I am thinking here of Partha Chatterjee, Ananya Roy, Leonardo Avritzer and Rebecca Abers. It would be great to have more of these kinds of scholars alongside African contributors, all speaking to global debates. But the idea of a bridge reaches both banks, so to speak. This means we need northern scholars and views from the north in the journal too. The idea is not to segregate but to bridge, to connect, so we will continue to include all voices in the journal. Our hope is to bring Theoria and the work we publish more fully into a global conversation, rather than start a side-discussion.

I think there are also organisational implications for this bridging approach. If Theoria is to bridge debates, ideas and scholars more effectively between global North and South, between developed and developing worlds, then we need to think about how we build networks in both places and how we connect both places. This has implications for our editorial board but also for how we engage organisationally. This is where we are working to develop a clearer strategy going forward. Recruiting strategically to the editorial team is one thing, building networks through joint activities is another undertaking entirely, but we need to do it and we have plans in development for achieving these goals.

If we can take that a step further, then: can you speak a little more about your plans for evolving the journal through strengthening and building on existing approaches and work?

Laurence: I think the editorial team is of the same mind that we need to continue a clear African focus in the journal, even if it is...
in the form of one special edition per year. Here we are thinking of anything to do with African political thought, African political tradition, African political philosophies. But in addition, as I have indicated, it would be great to include voices from elsewhere in the global South. To this end, we would encourage contributors from these places to set the substantive agenda of the journal – I do not want to foreclose any possible topics. Indeed, my personal view is that the issues that dominate global politics cannot be addressed unless they are addressed in the global South/developing world, whether this be climate change, sustainable development or even the questions of international security raised by the war in the Ukraine. For this reason, it is critical that we have views from the global South and from scholars of the global South on how to address these global challenges. If Theoria does a good job, we can be a forum to represent important voices and perspectives in a way that is accessible to scholars everywhere, given our Diamond Open Access option, which means that authors are not required to pay page fees to publish with us. This is especially important, I think, for scholars from universities and research institutes with limited budgets, and for emerging scholars as well.

Theoria: To pick up on two points, as a final question: you have mentioned special issues, and a desire to give a voice to emerging scholars in a more deliberate way. Can you say a bit more about how the editorial committee plans to address these two dimensions of the Journal?

Laurence: As I explained earlier on, Theoria has gone through a series of transitions from being a generalist in-house journal, to being a nationally recognised journal of political thought in South Africa and now to being an international journal with an emphasis on scholarship from the global South. This shift is evident in the content of the journal where, under Raph De Kadt, emphasis was placed on bringing leading international scholars into the journal to shape the debate in South Africa. Under Lawrence Hamilton, the emphasis was more on engaging internationally by bringing the views of the global South, and Africa in particular, into the international arena. I think we have made some gains in this regard. For example, in the last few years you will see that every year there is a
special edition that has a strong African theme, whether it is African nationalism, pan-Africanism, Azanian political thought or African philosophy. Notably these are often the most well received editions of the journal, too. So, I think *Theoria* is demonstrating that there is a hunger for ideas from the global South in debates in the global North. Perhaps the most dramatic example of this has been the way that the idea of decoloniality has been taken up in the United Kingdom, in particular and to some extent in the United States. We have an open invitation for proposals from potential guest editors to put together strong, topical issues of the Journal, focused on bringing different voices and perspectives together. We are especially interested in issues that represent the voices and perspectives of women, Black and Indigenous scholars, as well as emerging scholars or ‘new voices’.

To this end I have introduced an innovative space in the Journal for emerging scholars, in particular women, Black and Indigenous scholars. The idea is that emerging scholars will be mentored in the publication process by members of the editorial team to increase the chances that they make it through the review process. The objective is not to create an easier kind of publication, but rather a more supportive publishing process. This will require some of the editorial committee to volunteer time on a sustainable basis to act as mentors, and I think this will give expression to the vision of the journal as a place that is more inclusive of scholars in and of the global South. We are currently trialling the approach with a couple of emerging scholars and the results look promising.

Ultimately, I am excited about this further phase in the life of *Theoria*, and I am grateful to be supported by a committed editorial committee, a supportive publisher, and a wider group of editorial advisors who are proud to be associated with this journal and with the work we are doing. I look forward to seeing where our plans will take us, and to reading the work we will be sharing with our global readership in the coming few years.