

## **Justice, markets, and the family: an interview with Serena Olsaretti**

SERENA OLSARETTI (Naples, Italy, 1971) is a political philosopher at Pompeu Fabra University (UPF), where she holds a research professorship with the Catalan Institute of Research and Advanced Studies (ICREA). Before moving to Barcelona, she was University Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of Philosophy of Cambridge University. She obtained a BA, MPhil, and DPhil degree in political philosophy from Oxford University. Her DPhil thesis was supervised by G.A. Cohen.

Olsaretti's research interests range widely, including the ethics of markets, justice and the family, feminist philosophy, theories of responsibility, and theories of well-being. She is the author of *Liberty, desert and the market* (2004), and the editor of *Desert and justice* (2003), *Preferences and well-being* (2006), and the *Oxford handbook of distributive justice* (forthcoming). Her work has appeared in various journals, including *Analysis, Economics & Philosophy, Philosophy & Public Affairs*, and *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*. Olsaretti is one of the editors of *Law, Ethics, and Philosophy*. She is the principal investigator of *Family justice: an analysis of the normative significance of procreation and parenthood in a just society*, a research project funded by a European Research Council (ERC) consolidator grant.

The Erasmus Journal for Philosophy and Economics (EJPE) interviewed Olsaretti about becoming a political philosopher, her work on the ethics of markets and justice and the family, the ERC-project that she directs, her views on teaching, and her advice for political philosophy graduates aspiring to an academic career.

***EJPE: Professor Olsaretti, you studied political philosophy at Oxford University. Which people and writings have had a particular influence on the development of your interests during your studies?***

SERENA OLSARETTI: There was quite a difference between my undergraduate and graduate years. During my undergraduate years, two influential people were Peter Hacker and Gordon Baker, who ran a

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**EJPE's NOTE:** this interview was conducted by Huub Brouwer and Isabella Trifan. Brouwer is a PhD candidate at the Erasmus Institute for Philosophy and Economics, specializing in desert-based theories of justice and philosophy of taxation. At the time of the interview, he was on a research visit at UPF, supported by a Prins Bernhard Culture Fund Fellowship. Trifan is a PhD candidate at UPF, specializing in family justice. She is part of the ERC-funded Family Justice research team.

philosophy seminar on Hume's *Enquiry* (1993) at St. John's, the college where I was a student. The one thing that I remember most clearly from this seminar was Peter Hacker's dreaded 'What do you mean?' question. It was the first time that I was exposed to that degree of high expectations in terms of the clarity of what we said. I was also influenced by Jonathan Glover's lectures on moral philosophy, which really drew me to the topic.

However, on balance, I was more interested in continental philosophy than in analytical philosophy during my undergraduate studies. I was interested in Marxism, critical theory, and Michel Foucault. My first political philosophy tutor was Lois McNay, who worked on Foucault and feminism. For my undergraduate thesis, I chose to write a comparative study of the analyses of power of Herbert Marcuse and Michel Foucault. My thesis was supervised by Leszek Kołakowski, whom I knew as the writer of the three volume-work *Main currents of Marxism* (1982a, 1982b, 1982c). I remember that one of the few, if not the only, substantive comment he gave me on the thesis was: "This is fine, but move on". He thought that it would be fruitful for me to engage with a different type of philosophy, which I did.

When I finished the BA and went on to graduate studies, G.A. Cohen supervised me on an extended essay in methodology. I knew Cohen's work on analytical Marxism and was not very sympathetic to it at the time. When I told him that I was interested in anarchism, he got me to work on Robert Nozick. I found it very hard to take Nozick seriously at the beginning. I had not yet been trained in the habit of really engaging with arguments that I very much opposed. However, I did end up writing my MPhil thesis on Nozick, which was the basis for my DPhil thesis, and in turn the basis for my first book, *Liberty, desert and the market* (2004).

***Given your interest in continental philosophy during your undergraduate studies, how do you view the divide between analytic and continental philosophy? And do you still have some affinity for the continental?***

I kept a side interest in continental philosophy at the beginning of my graduate studies. I went to some lectures by eminent continental philosophers, including one by Jacques Derrida, whose book *Specters of Marx* (1994) I purchased and tried to read. However, my interest in that area faded quickly after that. I do think that a lot of the work that is done in continental philosophy does not aim for the standards of clarity

that we can reasonably demand of each other. Nevertheless, I have learned from engaging with some aspects of Marxism that were not analytical; I have learned from reading Marx, Gramsci, and some aspects of Foucault.

***After finishing your DPhil, you moved to Cambridge University, where you have been a senior lecturer in the Faculty of Philosophy. What made you decide to move to UPF?***

There were three main reasons. The first was that there already were a couple of colleagues at UPF who worked on areas of political philosophy that I was very interested in. So I thought that UPF would provide me with a very stimulating environment to work. Secondly, there was the promise of more research time here than I had previously. Thirdly, I was ready for a different type of challenge. I thought it would be very interesting to see whether we could get a center for political philosophy going here in Barcelona. That is quite different from going to a university such as Cambridge, where the best you can aim for is doing your own work within an apparatus that is already very good at running itself.

***You frequently use a luck egalitarian framework in your work (Bou-Habib and Olsaretti 2013; Olsaretti 2013). You have also read a paper at a meeting of the Aristotelian Society indicating aspects of luck egalitarianism that require further investigation (Olsaretti 2009). Do you identify as luck egalitarian yourself?***

I would have more readily identified with that label fifteen years ago. Debates on luck egalitarianism have made it clear that it really is a family of very disparate views. To just say 'I am a luck egalitarian' could mean substantially different things. Furthermore, I have come to have doubts about some versions of the view. There are aspects of luck egalitarianism that are taken to entail a commitment to holding people responsible for certain putatively harsh consequences of their choices. Like many others, I would reject a view that commits us to that. However, I also think that those aspects are not implied by the view itself. I argue in the Aristotelian Society paper you mention that the luck egalitarian commitment to holding people responsible is quite indeterminate. To just say 'I believe in luck egalitarianism because I believe that people should be held liable for the consequences of their choices', does not tell us very much at all. We need some other

independent view on what those consequences should be. For example, a view on the importance of desert, or of efficiency, or of other forward-looking reasons for holding people liable for certain consequences. Having said this, I am still happy to endorse the two impulses that characterize luck egalitarianism according to Cohen. It is unjust if some people are substantially better off than others through factors that they are not responsible for. It is also unjust, for reasons of exploitation, if people do not bear some of the costs of their choices. But I think that most people are luck egalitarians in these broad terms.

***We would like to home in on two major themes in your research, the ethics of markets, and justice and the family. Let's start with the ethics of markets. In Liberty, desert and the market (2004), you criticize two common arguments that aim to justify free markets. The first claims that the inequalities generated by free markets are just because they are deserved; the second claims that such inequalities are just because they are what people's voluntary choices entitle them to. On your view, both arguments are unsuccessful. Is the market inherently unjust?***

I think there are various senses in which we might talk of the market as being inherently unjust. First, what the market registers and responds to is potentially inimical to justice. It responds, for example, to people's ability to pay, and this ability is often influenced by factors for which it would be unjust to hold people liable. Also, the market registers people's preferences (as this is registered in the demand for one's services) and it can be unjust to allow how people fare to depend on others' preferences. Second, we could have in mind, and this was a big theme for Cohen, and certainly for Marx, that the profit motive that drives market interactions is itself necessarily unjust, as it is a motive that is fundamentally at odds with the demands of fraternity and community. I still have sympathy to both of these claims. However, even though the market does tend towards injustice, it plays vital roles in terms of providing incentives and signals. The market is here to stay. We can make it come closer to justice by regulating it with a special concern for people being in positions to make a range of voluntary and autonomy protecting choices.

***The most important way in which governments implement a conception of justice is arguably through systems of taxation. Hence,***

*if political philosophers are concerned with guiding policy, one would expect them to have developed various general theories about how to shape tax policy. However, such contributions are few (cf. Halliday 2013). Should political philosophers contribute more to debates about taxation in your view?*

It would certainly be valuable for political philosophers to engage more with public policy debates and issues, including tax policy. It is true that, until not so long ago, political philosophers often focused on coercive laws, as opposed to policy instruments such as taxation. People who work at the intersection between philosophy and economics do work on this now. There are, for example, discussions of the merits of carbon tax and of the Tobin tax. Also, you forgot to mention the book by Liam Murphy and Thomas Nagel in your question.

**The myth of ownership (2002).**

Yes, as I recall it, Murphy and Nagel offered a way of reframing public debates about tax. One of their main points is that there is no such thing as pre-tax income that people have a natural right to—the latter idea being especially prevalent in the United States. Property rights are essentially a legal convention, which depends, among other things, on what tax system is in place; we can and should, then, assess the justice or injustice of various tax and property systems, but we should not treat any of them as natural rather than conventional. Their book is an endeavor to reset some of the ways in which we think about taxation policy and especially income tax. It aims to improve the public debate about taxation, although it does not offer specific public policy-guidance.

***Do you think that all political philosophy should be action-guiding?***

An increasing number of political philosophers have become interested in providing policy recommendations after the debate on ideal and non-ideal theory. I do think that giving policy recommendations is one of the important ways that political philosophers can contribute, but I do not think that all political philosophy should be aimed at that level, as opposed to contributing to the general political culture.

***Do you yourself intend to take a more policy-guiding approach than you have done in the past?***

I would love to do it if I knew how to give policy recommendations that I thought were sound. But that is immensely complicated. There are people who are better at doing that kind of bridging work between the more philosophical part and the more applied part. I tend to remain less applied.

***John Kleinig wrote in 1971 that “the notion of desert seems by and large to have been consigned to the philosophical scrap heap” (p. 71). Interestingly, a number of political philosophers have recently attempted to save desert from oblivion (Arneson 2007; Feldman 2016; Kagan 2012; Lippert-Rasmussen 2016; Miller 1999; Mulligan forthcoming; Schmitz 2006; Temkin 2011). What do you think about this revival of desert?***

Certainly the death that Kleinig anticipated did not occur between 1971 and 2004, when I was still working on this closely. I am not sure, however, that there has been this huge revival either.

***Well, you now have people who are interested in combining desert with luck egalitarianism (Arneson 2007; Dekker 2009; Lippert-Rasmussen 2016; Temkin 2011) and people who develop new desert-based theories (Feldman 2016; Mulligan forthcoming; Schmitz 2006).***

Yes, maybe the immediate influence of John Rawls’ desert-less theory of justice was to take the concept off the table for a while. That is true. Kleinig probably thought that Rawls’ critique of desert was going to take it off the table completely. But we have to be clear about what kind of desert we are talking about. During the last twenty years in debates on desert, it has become increasingly apparent that although there are many different conceptions of it, only some of them are really distinctive. That is, only some conceptions of desert really pick out something that other principles of justice do not—such as needs or equality. Peter Vallentyne’s (2003) use of prudential desert is what initially made the concept seem attractive to me, but I have increasingly come to see it as unhelpful, as by ‘prudential desert’ he means something like a principle of responsibility. Desert so understood does not have a distinctive normative basis.

***Let us move on to a second major theme in your research. You are the principal investigator of an ERC-funded research project on justice and the family. Why should political philosophers consider the family in thinking about distributive justice?***

First of all, by family I mean any institution in which new people are created and reared. I do not consider various aspects of the family, such as whether the adult members who compose a family are married. The association of the family with gender issues is also not a primary focus of the project, though I do share some of the feminist concerns related to the gendered division of care. So when we understand the project to be about procreation and parenthood, why should theorists of justice be interested in it? The answer is that all societies, including just societies, rely on people having and rearing children. Having and rearing children comes with costs and benefits that are very substantial for all parties involved: those who raise them, those who are brought into existence and are raised, and society at large. If questions of justice arise anywhere, they will arise here as well. I also think there are less immediately evident reasons for why, as philosophers, we should examine the family. For instance, once we start unpacking prevalent theories of justice, many of which have not paid attention to family justice, it turns out that they must necessarily assume some views about it. So in a way, the interest is inescapable. It is not just that theories of justice are being blind to something that they should be interested in; it is rather that they are already implicitly committed to some answers to the questions that I want to bring to the fore.

***Could you say more about the main characteristics and goals of the Family Justice project?***

The entry objective is to bring into view the way in which questions about procreation and parenthood, including about justice between contemporaries and justice across generations, are integral to our discussions of familiar problems of justice. Another key aim of the project is to formulate principles of parental justice that are informed by independent convictions that we have—for example, about whether there is a problem of overpopulation, and if so, how to tackle it. These principles of parental justice ought to be consistent with the other parts of our familiar theories of justice that already assume or imply some views about parental justice. For example, we need a theory of liberal egalitarian justice that does not commit us to thinking that people's fair

shares can diminish indefinitely in line with people's having more and more children; but that, at the same time, does not renounce on the idea that people are tied by egalitarian justice obligations towards one another. It would, for instance, not be good to hold parents liable for all the costs of children, which include the costs they will impose as fellow adults, because this results in a view that effectively cancels the obligations of egalitarian justice that we have towards our fellow citizens. So we do not think that what we are owed should fluctuate entirely depending on people's procreation choices—as it should not fluctuate entirely depending on consumption choices or production choices. But how do we, and how can we, reconcile that challenge with a plausible and attractive view of egalitarian relationships between people?

***In Children as public goods? (2013) you argue that parents, by having and raising children to be law-abiding, productive citizens, create goods that non-parents also benefit from. Centrally, welfare states are designed such that the goods that parents create are socialized through their offspring's contributions to schemes that pay for everyone's retirement benefits, unemployment benefits, and other welfare provisions and public projects. You argue that it would be unfair for non-parents to refuse to shoulder some of the costs of parenting because they would be free riding on parents' efforts. How do you respond to those who challenge your 'children as socialized goods' argument by claiming that parents produce public harm, either by raising their children badly, or by adding to overpopulation (cf. Casal 1999)?***

A disappointing part of the answer is that investigating these questions is one of the key aims of the project. But even now I can say a couple of things that begin to address the sting behind them. First of all, what the public goods arguments and the socialized goods argument show is that at least within certain contexts, leaving aside questions about immigration, there is a case for socializing the costs of children. Now I say leaving aside immigration, but I think that a second implication of public goods arguments is that they may have some role to play even when we stop bracketing off the immigration question. If it is the case that there are reasons to let immigrants in, or indeed that we have an obligation to let them in, public goods arguments imply that the goods produced by immigrants are now the goods that are public or socialized.



The parents of migrants have provided us with these goods. So the argument still has implications in this context.

Now, as potential objections to the empirical premise of some version of the public goods argument (that is, the premise that parents provide a good to everyone by having and rearing children) the overpopulation issue is one thing, and the ‘parents are parenting badly’ objection is a completely different one. We need to know why they are parenting badly. Many people, for example Robert Goodin (2005), think that public goods arguments have the implausible implication that parents of children who are less valuable in the senses identified by those arguments (for example, being less productive) are owed less or nothing. Now it may be true that these arguments taken by themselves have that implication. But again, you have to see them as part of a broader view. And the broader view is likely to say something along these lines: Many parents parent badly because they have lacked certain adequate opportunities or because they are themselves at the short end of unjust inequalities. The fuller picture will say something about *that* being an injustice. So I do not see the objection that appeals to the differential value of children under non-ideal conditions as an objection to the defensibility of public goods arguments as such.

***How do you see your ‘children as socialized goods’ argument being translated into public policy? What sorts of entitlements should parents have?***

It sounds like you are delegates of the research impact committee! Whatever the ambitions of the project as a whole should have, I do not think that specific conclusions of the paper should be seen as translating into policy directly. As is obvious, they suggest that parents have *some* claim to sharing the costs of children, but that is as far as it goes. When it comes to which costs should be shared exactly, that needs to be worked out. And when it comes to the question of how they should be shared, many further questions need to be answered. For example, is it through parental leave policies, and if so, what kind? Or should it be through some kind of earmarked parental salary that nonetheless does not require the parent to stay at home with the child? This is where I retreat to the point of abstract theorizing: I see the paper not as providing direct support for specific policies, but as uncovering certain biases. Public goods arguments of the kind developed by Nancy Folbre (1994) already make perspicuous that rather than being a private

activity similar to a consumption choice, having and raising children actually is socially beneficial. I think even that does not go far enough, because it does not bring to view that redistributive societies are deliberately organizing themselves in such a way as to ensure that everybody benefits from the fact that parents have and raise children.

***A common view is that societal intervention in procreative and parenting choices should be as limited as possible, particularly because of the history of eugenics and of pro-natalist policies in totalitarian regimes. However, a theory of justice giving due consideration to the family may advocate increased state intervention with these choices. How do you think we could have fruitful public debates about family justice issues given the sensitivity of the topic?***

I have already encountered some of the reactions that you are pointing to a fair amount. I do think we should proceed with a lot of caution. The preamble that almost everybody makes in this area, which is the right preamble, is that nothing that one says necessarily supports the view that states may coercively interfere with people's procreative freedom. We are right to be cautious, not just about coercive instruments that interfere with procreative choices through violations of bodily integrity, but also about seemingly more liberty-respecting policies that may be guided by the wrong type of considerations. For example, support for two-parent families may be guided much more by worries about people from certain socio-economic or racial groups having children. Policies directing subsidies or tax breaks to two-parent households may invoke the interests of children when, in reality, they are informed by objectionable agendas, and may actually reinforce some injustices.

What else can one say to smooth the way to debate? These questions, again, are simply inescapable. They are inescapable not only in the sense that they are politically urgent, but also because any view we take on these matters implicitly assumes an answer to them. So it is just hypocritical to say that we are not already taking a stance on these things. We would do procreators, parents, and ourselves much more justice if we discussed the pros and cons of different views openly. Also, notice that although many people cringe at the thought of eugenics, everybody agrees that it would be somewhat problematic if I decided to have twenty children. Or if several of us did, in a situation in which there is no desperate need for more children. So there is the issue of

moral permissibility, and then there is the fact that I would be creating costs for others very visibly, by claiming benefits.

Finally, let me say that, yes, there are reasons to be very cautious with these debates; but remember that this is also the reaction that people had to, for example, the feminist agenda. There have been areas that people thought were off limits for all kinds of reasons, and we have learned to handle and minimize that reaction insofar as it is unjustified.

***Next to research, teaching and supervision also take up a significant portion of the time of academics. Robert Nozick used teaching as a way of working out his ideas, remarking that “If somebody wants to know what I’m going to do next, what they ought to do is keep an eye on the Harvard course catalogue” (Gewertz 2012). What role do teaching and supervision play for you?***

They play a much less substantial role now than they did when I was in Cambridge, where I had about twelve to eighteen hours per week between lectures, seminars, and supervision.

It is true that teaching is a way of working out ideas. First, it keeps a live interest in areas other than the one that you are closely researching in. And that is a good thing in itself, because it is important to keep yourself interested in other topics. But teaching is also important instrumentally. I still think that you are more likely to do good research if you are actively engaging with ideas that are not so close to your narrow area of research. Moreover, teaching has, at several stages, forced me to think more clearly about various topics. When you are talking to people at or above your level, you often can afford yourself some vagueness, because you know the interlocutor will understand what you are talking about. This is not so when you are teaching.

I have had a very different experience teaching at the MA level in Cambridge, from the experience I have here at UPF. In Cambridge I had students who had a very strong background in philosophy, so the challenge was to stay a step ahead, especially in areas that were not my area of research. Sometimes I have worked out ideas thanks to presenting them in lectures and addressing questions I received about them. Here at UPF, by contrast, I often come across students in the MA who either have not done philosophy at all, or have done philosophy of the continental type. This is a different type of challenge. It forces you to spell out and defend some of the assumptions that you normally can just take as given.

***Women and non-white persons are underrepresented in academic philosophy. What was your experience as a woman pursuing a career in philosophy?***

For a long time, my answer to this question used to be, 'well, I have not come across anything that could be seen as an instance of sexism in philosophy.' But then I realized that I come from a sexist country.

During my undergraduate studies and through part of my graduate studies, I think I was not as sensitive to some of the problems that my North American and Northern European colleagues would have been sensitive to. Although I have not had any particularly bad experiences with sexism, I do think that there have been some cases where, if I had had a different set of expectations, I may have found some of the behavior towards graduate students inappropriate. For example, male staff members asking a graduate student to babysit for them, even when the student had expressed no interest in it, and resisted the idea.

I would also like to mention that I derived a lot of inspiration from female tutors I had along the way. Lois McNay, Katherine Morris, and Alison Denham come to mind. I do think that they stood up as figures who brightened and diversified the academic landscape in a very welcome way.

***How do you deal with the lack of diversity in your current position?***

The only active thing that I see myself doing now is that I am more aware of these issues and try to make others aware. Whenever I organize events, I make a deliberate effort to invite women working in the area. The other thing I would like to do is engaging more with ICREA about how to attract more women. We know that in academia, even in areas where there are enough women at the undergraduate level, the higher up you go in terms of the career ladder, the fewer women there are. ICREA, especially with its slant towards natural sciences and mathematics, has too few women. We want to arrive at recommendations that are inclusive, but do not compromise the high academic standards that ICREA wants to maintain.

***If you had to name three philosophical works that any political philosophy student should read, which would those be?***

It depends on the stage of their career. At the early stage of their career, I would recommend John Stuart Mill's *On liberty* (2002), Plato's *Republic* (1991), and Mary Wollstonecraft's *A vindication of the rights of woman*

(1996). It is important at this point to get people to engage with work that they do not find obscure or too distant from their concerns, but that nonetheless contains a wealth of very important, controversial ideas. Across their entire career, it must be Rawls' *A theory of justice* (1999), Rousseau's *The social contract* (1968), and Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1982).

***What further advice would you give to graduate students aiming to pursue an academic career in political philosophy?***

Do not necessarily think of writing a book! Also, commit to writing one or two papers in good journals before you finish. And spend time on the enduring works; concentrate on becoming acquainted with the really good stuff!

One of the really dispiriting facts that all of us have to handle is that we are under increasing pressure to publish and edit. So we all publish, we all edit, and there are so many journals of various degrees of quality now, that it is very hard to be informed about what goes on. It is a hard act to balance. You do not want to start reading too widely because that will eat up all your time and many publications are not necessarily of central importance. But, at the same time, there is this other thing to avoid, which is that many of us publish something without realizing that it has been said months, or a year, or two years before. Referees are often in the same predicament.

Another piece of advice is this: one of the things that helped me most when I was stuck during my graduate studies was reading some inspiring great political philosophers. That always magically managed to make things work again. So if you read some Dworkin, or some Rawls, or some Cohen, you think to yourself, 'I also want to write as clearly' and you get into the right spirit and you can work again. I still find now that reading Jerry Cohen's work liberates and inspires me. So do not lose yourself in reading stuff that is not inspiring.

***What are you most proud of in your career as a political philosopher?***

I am grateful for the fantastic opportunities that I have had, but proud? I have found it very rewarding to have had brilliant students whom I could really see appreciated our conversations and supervisions. Another thing—though, again, I do not think 'pride' is the term I would use to describe the satisfaction I felt—is this: when I was writing my MPhil thesis, and I kept saying things that had been said before about

Nozick, I became very dispirited. Cohen, who was a relentlessly brilliant but not necessarily constructive supervisor, would keep giving me penetrating criticism. It was not clear to him the MPhil thesis would become the kind of work he would want to see to take me on as his doctoral student. I kept trying, and after submitting to Jerry the pre-final version of the thesis with one new chapter that contained my new ideas, I found a phone message from him on my answering machine (in those days I think we still barely used e-mail!). He said: "I've read your thesis, and I think it's brilliant". It was exhilarating, and a huge relief. I do not know if this is the kind of thing you had in mind when thinking about what one might take pride in. But that has probably been one of my nicest moments.

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**Serena Olsaretti's website:**

<<https://www.icrea.cat/Web/ScientificStaff/serena-olsaretti-520>>

**Family Justice project website:**

<<https://familyjustice.upf.edu/>>