

The Philosophy, Politics and Economics of Food. An Introduction to the Special Section

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Abstract

The undergraduate degree Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE) has attracted a stereotype of developing future political and financial elites with little regard to the subject material covered in the programme. This clashes with student expectations and university messaging on PPE, which, especially at the University of Warwick, highlight the importance of interdisciplinary perspectives for addressing complex global challenges. This introduction to this special section argues that it is imperative to centre students' voices in defining PPE, and, to this end, showcases a co-creation process aimed at developing an interdisciplinary module. The resulting module on the PPE of food thereby speaks to how students understand their PPE: as a programme that breaks with interdisciplinary silos to answer complex questions relevant to the world we live in.

Keywords: Interdisciplinarity, PPE, Food, Philosophy, Politics, Economics, Co-creation

Introduction

Academia is at a crossroads. A third of students feel dissatisfied with their university, and nearly half of all students believe university does not represent value for money (Friday, 2023). At the same time, UK universities are calling for new funding models to prevent financial collapse (Ogden and Waltman, 2024). For academia to survive and thrive, a change is needed.

This issue is particularly pronounced in the subject of Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE), which has come to represent an academic pursuit for future Prime Ministers, political elites and financiers. In 2017, an article in *The Guardian* titled 'PPE: the Oxford Degree that runs Britain' asked whether it 'has produced an out-of-touch ruling class' (Beckett, 2017). At the core of these debates are perceptions that students study PPE mostly as a tool to increase status. The desire to attain an interdisciplinary insight into the most pressing issues of our time rarely features when PPE students are discussed. Yet, PPE is not just a topic reserved for the political elite at Oxford, nor just stimulating discussion only inside debating rooms and exam halls. There is real value to an integrated, interdisciplinary approach in highlighting what would otherwise lie unseen when applied to the important topics of life.

If you were to ask a PPE student or a prospective undergraduate at a university open day what PPE means to them, you would inevitably receive a significant variety of answers. In their own way, these answers would all provide crucial insight into how young people perceive the modern world. Instead of suppressing that creativity and forcing conformity to strict patterns of academic practice, academia could consider a new approach: to let students define PPE, to be active participants in the creation and study of their subject, to be seen as academic minds rather than tuition-fee-paying customers. In doing so, there is a chance to redefine the benefit of PPE and revalue the university experience to a new generation of bright academic minds. It is this thought process that encouraged a group of academics and students at the University of Warwick to recreate the module 'PPE: Interdisciplinary Topics' thinking through the PPE of food.

Defining PPE through co-creation

Funded by the Warwick International Higher Education Academy, ‘the UK’s first institutional academy of educators’ (Warwick Higher Education Academy, 2024), the project aimed to develop a model for student co-creation for interdisciplinary modules in joint degrees (Gelhaus and Ferguson, 2023). The co-creation process comprised two groups, a Curriculum Group and a Directors Group. With a mix of PPE students and staff from the three PPE departments in both groups, the Curriculum Group proposed the module design, which was subsequently discussed and eventually decided on by the Directors Group (Gelhaus and Ferguson, 2023: 5). By involving students in both groups, students developed greater ownership over the module topics, reading lists, structure, delivery and assessment methods.

Much of our discussions focused on how to design a ‘truly’ interdisciplinary PPE module. In PPE and similar joint-degree courses, students rarely engage in interdisciplinary thinking. Instead, they are typically siloed into single-discipline modules offered separately by the respective departments. However, this may contrast students’ expectations of their degree (Gelhaus and Ferguson, 2023: 6). To bridge the three disciplines, this project consistently selected topics and readings with an interdisciplinary approach in mind (Gelhaus and Ferguson, 2023: 11). This means that each weekly topic should be studied through an integration of perspectives from philosophy, politics and economics. Hence, contrasting common PPE stereotypes, the module co-creation process was marked by a particular focus on ensuring interdisciplinarity throughout the module.

Students in the co-creation group also highlighted that students should take a more active role in shaping their assessments. This would define ‘their’ PPE course further by studying those questions that matter most to them rather than responding to pre-formulated essay prompts. Therefore, following the established student-as-researcher paradigm (Walkington, 2015), the module would also include the development of research skills and encourage an independent exploration of topics beyond lectures and reading lists. Students therefore could design their own research agenda, first through a research proposal and finally a research paper, some of which are included in this special section.

Further to facilitating students to define ‘their’ PPE course, the co-creation process also had other benefits. First, it contributed to decreasing the student–staff divide through fostering an understanding that both sides are passionate about teaching and learning PPE (Gelhaus and Ferguson, 2023: 8). Second, co-creators noted that this process integrated students into the university community and helped them understand different considerations of module design (Gelhaus and Ferguson, 2023: 9f.). Finally, module co-creators noted that the project presented them with unique opportunities to venture beyond the beaten track of similar modules (Gelhaus and Ferguson, 2023: 10f.).

A PPE lens for food

Students in the co-creation process also emphasised the importance of understanding PPE in connection to challenging real-world problems as well as to their everyday lives. The topic of food is an ideal starting point.

Few of the pressing challenges for the global food system can be understood, let alone addressed, through a single disciplinary lens. In March, an Integrated Food Security Phase Classification report noted that 96 per cent of the population in Gaza faces high acute food insecurity and imminent famine (Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, 2024: 1f.). Not only is Gaza yet another reminder of the importance of understanding famine (see e.g. De Waal, 2024), it also clearly raises questions of the moral and political

responsibility to address it. Russia's ongoing war on Ukraine has had unequal economic consequences and particularly affected some of the world's poorest populations (Parasecoli and Varga, 2024: 4f.). The war has also highlighted the connection of food and national identity through debates on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection for the Culture of Ukrainian borscht cooking (UNESCO, 2022) and raised normative questions of whether the Ukrainian government should focus on the support of large Ukrainian agri-businesses or family farmers (Mamonova *et al.*, 2023). Overall, in what McMichael (2009) has conceptualised as the corporate food regime, questions of politics and economics are easily blurred in understanding the relative power of large food-processing firms and local producers or the role of national governments in a world marked by globalisation. Any understanding of global food regimes will also be incomplete without questions of philosophy. Should there, for instance, be a moral economy based on ethics of care (Goodman, 2004)? And how should we conceive of non-human entities in answering key questions on our food regime, such as animals or the environment (Jamieson, 1998; Singer, 2015; Zangwill, 2021), especially in times of excessive habitat destruction and climate emergency?

Global food systems, while seemingly abstract, have concrete effects on how we eat, and thus affect deeply personal choices. For example, questions discussed in the module included the ethics of buying locally or consuming meat, as well as how much we as consumers value food beyond its sustenance. For instance, are we willing to pay more for commodities with Fair Trade labels, those that are produced close to us, or that are protected as local specialities, and if so, what do our consumption choices imply for producers (Bowen and Zapata, 2009; Ferguson and Thompson, 2021; Wilson and Jackson, 2016)? How does public health messaging affect the choices of not only what we consume, but also how infants are fed, and is existing messaging reflective of parents' moral obligations to their children and themselves (Moriarty and Davies 2024)?

Connecting the dots: The special section

The papers in this special section approach many of the above questions through the lens of PPE. Students developed these papers throughout the module 'PPE: Interdisciplinary Topics', first as research proposals and then as full research papers. While many papers connect to themes discussed in the module, all ventured independently beyond the syllabus to explore what the PPE of food means to students, and this is reflected in the wide variety of topics discussed. Despite this variety, the papers in this section can be broadly categorised into two categories: those papers that discuss how philosophical questions inform food choices, and those that are focused on the consequences of these choices.

The papers in the first category investigate how questions of ethics, morality and freedom (may) inform both personal and political choices on food. Oliver's contribution takes on the question of value, as it investigates whether private or national brands are morally superior. While private brands, also referred to as supermarket's own brands, are often presented as morally superior through a perception that they offer cheaper alternatives than national brands, the paper indicates the shortcomings of these arguments. This includes that effects on price are not uniform as well as other drawbacks – in particular, private brands' negative effect on innovation.

Gunalan tackles a key challenge of humankind: environmental degradation and deforestation. She considers this through a moral analysis of the European Union's Regulation on Deforestation-free Products, primarily focusing on the implication for palm-oil producers. Crucially, she investigates whether the European Union, given especially European histories of colonial exploitation, has a moral obligation to palm-oil producers in the Global South.

Knoth investigates the puzzle of why tobacco and junk food are regulated differently in the UK, even though both have been demonstrated to have detrimental effects on individuals' health. Arguing that one piece of the puzzle may be how policymakers conceive personal freedoms, he demonstrates that parliamentary debates on junk food are characterised by a negative conception of freedom, focusing on the freedom of humans from external intervention and the assumptions that humans know what is best for them. On the other hand, debates on tobacco centre around positive conceptions of freedom, in which the government presents itself as promoter of individuals' supposedly 'true wish' to stop smoking. Primarily, this difference can be explained by different conceptions of rationality in consumption decisions: while for tobacco, consumers' choices are presented as irrational due to nicotine's addictive potentials, the addictive potentials of junk foods are not discussed.

The set of papers in the second category instead discuss the consequences and performance of food politics. More specifically, both papers in this category explore questions of food and national identity. Bye's paper explores processes of gastronationalism in Cornwall. By analysing promotional material by Cornish tourist boards, he finds that Cornish food is presented as an integral part of Cornish identity, and that Cornish identity here is constructed as national, rather than simply a regional identity. Thereby, he offers insightful reflections on the existing understanding of gastronationalism. First, Cornwall represents a curious case in which foods are used to construct a national identity vis-à-vis a hegemonic national identity, in this case, an English identity. Second, it contributes an argument on cultural revivalism, which has been less pronounced in the literature on gastronationalism.

Finally, Huan's paper shifts our attention to the intersection of national politics and international trade as he analyses Malaysia's ban on exports of chicken as well as its representations in government and media discourse. Drawing on insights from securitisation theory, Huan finds that while government actors and local media downplay the relevance of the export ban for Singapore, foreign media engaged in securitising speech. These media sources explicitly constructed the process as a crisis and drew connections of the ban to chicken rice as being Singapore's de facto national dish, thereby constructing the ban as an existential threat. Hence, this paper adds two interesting insights to the securitisation literature: First, it investigates food as a seldomly explored sector. Second, it does so in a context in which local actors aimed to de-securitise in contrast to foreign media.

The collection of papers in this special section spans an impressive range of relevant questions, all of which require breaking free from strict disciplinary silos. If we accept this module as reflecting an understanding of PPE as a subject that focuses on the most important topics in our lives and studies them from an interdisciplinary angle, then perhaps this harnesses potential for future PPE-educated Prime Ministers as being equipped to face the challenges we face.

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