EDITORS' NOTE

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On November 4, 2025, citizens of New York City elected Democratic candidate Zohran Mamdani "as its first Muslim and first South-Asian mayor" (Goodwin). Though a local election merely, the results were closely watched nationally—and not just in the U.S., as BBC News made its morning-after report:

> Since democratic socialist Zohran Mamdani first entered New York City's mayoral race, the 34-year-old state assemblyman from Queens has risen from near-total obscurity into the national spotlight. His bold, left-wing platform has energised progressives, shaken up his Democratic Party, and drawn harsh criticism from President Donald Trump and other Republicans. "Today we have spoken in a clear voice: hope is alive," Mamdani told supporters after triumphing in the contest. Unlike his more established opponents, Mamdani's new perspective, youth and new left-wing platform excited and ultimately won over voters eager for a fresher politician. "Let City Hall, with our compassion, our conviction and our clarity, be the light that our city and our nation so desperately need," Mamdani said on the week he was elected. (Goodwin)

"Ugandan-born of Indian parents" (Goodwin), Mamdani ran a successful campaign based in issues of affordability and access. Having promised to freeze rents in city-subsidized housing, reduce energy bills, and offer free public transport, Mamdani must now enact a series of progressive policy changes that New York's city government will have to find ways to fund, administer, and enforce. If his mayoralty succeeds, Mamdani will be seen as an embodiment of social justice. "Hope is alive," says the mayor-elect, and most New Yorkers now share in this hope. But the onus falls on City Hall as Mamdani himself notes, since one man's campaign promises will require city-wide changes in government institutions and policies, including laws and law enforcement, taxation levels, and basic infrastructure.

And not all share his hope. As another BBC News headline reads, "Trump Says it's 'Communism or Common Sense' after Democrat Mamdani Wins NYC Mayoral Election." The brief news report continues:

> Trump says that after last night's election results, the difference between the two parties could not be more clear, saying it's a choice between "communism and common sense." "Our opponents are offering an economic nightmare and we are offering an economic miracle," he said. "They put America last, we put America first." (BBC News)

The stakes are high for New Yorkers, with politicians "on both sides of the aisle" keeping a close, critical eye on City Hall. Still, with so many crises of access and affordability worldwide, why should a "mere" mayoral election matter to readers of this *LLIDS* Special Issue? There are other crises the world over, many far more dire: of grinding poverty; of systemic inequality and discrimination by race, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity; of food

insecurity and famine; of civilian deaths and displacements through flooding, fires, drought, and climate change generally; of civil war; of ethnic cleansing; of genocide. These, indeed, matter; so why begin with the story of NYC mayor-elect Mamdani?

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This Special Issue and its attendant forum seeks to initiate a global dialogue on social justice (SJ), a term marking the intersection of politics and public policy, ethics and economics, pedagogy and social praxis. The Center for Economic and Social Justice (CESJ), a politically non-partisan think-tank headquartered in Washington, D.C., offers a concise description:

> Social justice is the virtue which guides us in creating those organized human interactions we call institutions. In turn, social institutions, when justly organized, provide us with access to what is good for the person, both individually and in our associations with others. Social justice also imposes on each of us a personal responsibility to work with others to design and continually perfect our institutions as tools for personal and social development. (Center for Economic and Social Justice)

And, *de rigueur*, social justice "encompasses economic justice" (Center for Economic and Social Justice). The CESJ description accords with recent declarations made by the United Nations: namely, that "Social justice […] broadly understood as the fair and compassionate distribution of the fruits of economic growth," provides "an underlying principle for peaceful and prosperous coexistence within and among nations" (International Forum 7). While considerations of economics undergird SJ theory, its discourse reaches beyond economics to address inequalities of access, privilege, and rights generally.

As an interdisciplinary journal in the Humanities, *LLIDS* enjoys a scholarly readership focused on languages, literatures, and cultural discourse. Unsurprisingly, a majority of the journal's authors and readers are academicians whose teaching and research interests reflect some interest in social justice. (I'd assume, further, that most readers embrace SJ theory as part of their intellectual "equipment." We profess it in our scholarship; we teach it in the classroom.) As a mode of academic discourse, SJ theory embraces a range of critical theories and methods, including colonialist criticism, critical race theory (CRT), gender criticism, queer theory, and cultural criticism. The realm of "the social" is well explored in these prior theories and methods. What SJ theory adds to their varied social-cultural perspectives is a heightened emphasis upon institution-alization. It's the "J" in SJ theory that marks its territory and defines its discourse.

For SJ theory offers to critique the institutions—social, political, economic—that sustain inequalities of access, privilege, and rights. In practice, SJ theory aims to deinstitutionalize systematic inequality by means of progressive public policy. Indeed, treating equal access and opportunity as matters of social "justice" necessarily entails law and policy. Concomitantly, the promotion of equal access, privilege, and rights rests in institutions and infrastructure—that is, in adequately funded government offices and

public agencies. Again in practice, SJ theory seeks to protect and expand rights of individuals and historically underserved communities.[1]

As noted above, academicians in the U.S. and elsewhere have invested heavily in SJ theory. They have done so with the institutional support of public school systems and universities and—as important—with financial underwriting by state legislatures. That is, until recently. In the U.S. (and elsewhere, as contributors to this *LLIDS* Special Issue have noted), an ultraconservative brand of politics has gained power within federal government and several state legislatures, and its leaders have taken aim at SJ policies and projects. With conservative media outlets amplifying their political message, they have used the institutions of government—its laws, its powers of policing and, perhaps most potent, its sources of funding—to dismantle SJ-supportive policies in social services, business hiring, legal advocacy, and education. At the federal level, this is reflected in the current U.S. administration's assault against school "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion" (DEI) initiatives and CRT curricula.[2] Perhaps inevitably, school DEI policies have become flashpoints in the nation's politically charged "culture wars." Even as this Issue's forum is being edited for publication, departments of English and cultural studies across the nation engage in an intensely ideological struggle, aiming to provide ethical/intellectual/aesthetic defense of (and justification for) teaching practices supportive of progressive social policy.

We have long thought that academia's Ivory Tower stood above party politics, and that it ought to do so. In my lifetime as a student and teacher, academic freedom was taken for granted, irrespective of the party in power. This is no longer the case. I do not blame conservative party politics per se, since numerous SJ policies (in voting rights, civil liberties, and equal opportunities in housing and employment) have enjoyed broad bipartisan support. Besides, a healthy democracy demands a diversity of voices and viewpoints. But the factionalism that has overtaken the institutions of government is not "business as usual." As an intellectual community, we can no longer ignore the political firestorm that surrounds us, lapping at our own Ivory Tower, once seemingly impervious, with its flames. In the current state of affairs, our own academic freedoms fall under

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[1]In alignment with posthumanism and ecocriticism, SJ theory extends its protections to the planet and its delicate ecology. Given that an extinction of whole species is threatened by climate change and environmental degradation, these our "companion species" are afforded rights under SJ theory. See, Baumlin, James S. "From Postmodernism to Posthumanism: Theorizing Ethos in an Age of Pandemic." *Humanities*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2020, pp. 1–25, https://doi.org/10.3390/h9020046.

[2]For readers unfamiliar with the term, critical race theory (CRT) "is an academic field focused on the relationships between social conceptions of race and ethnicity, social and political laws, and mass media. CRT also considers racism to be systemic in various laws and rules, not based only on individuals' prejudices" ("Critical"). The web article continues:

> CRT is also used in sociology to explain social, political, and legal structures and power distribution as through a "lens" focusing on the concept of race, and experiences of racism. For example, the CRT conceptual framework examines racial bias in laws and legal institutions, such as highly disparate rates of incarceration among racial groups in the United States. A key CRT concept is intersectionality—the way in which different forms of inequality and identity are affected by interconnections among race, class, gender, and disability. ("Critical")

In the U.S., the current federal administration has joined with conservative state governments in banishing CRT curricula from public schools and universities.

assault; and, even as voices of dissent are being forcibly silenced, we choose to add our voice to theirs.

Here in the U.S. and elsewhere, the academician is called to speak out. Though bold in its call-to-action, such is the starting point for this Issue on social justice, which seeks to reflect on, analyze, expand on, and complicate SJ theory and its applications. As noted above, the *LLIDS* editors have sought to involve authors and audiences globally in exploring this timely issue. Though terms like diversity, equity, and inclusion have wide appeal, it stands to reason that diverse communities will express different needs and aspirations. A glance at contributors' topics (and their academic affiliations) will show if this noble aim has been achieved.

Prospective contributors were posed with a series of questions and propositions apropos to the topic:

- How does SJ theory understand itself as an ideology or ideological behavior?
- How is SJ theory taught? What is its curriculum? What are its paths of resistance?
- In the classroom, in scholarship, and in public/political discourse, what does SJ theory enable or make visible? What does it leave unseen or unspoken? What are its "blind spots"?
- How can SJ theory address the political-economic crisis of the so-called 1% against the 99%?
- Can social justice have the same meaning and application/implication for all communities, charting both the Global North and the Global South?
- As per the U.N. declaration, social justice seeks a "fair and compassionate distribution" of wealth. This remains a noble aim and aspiration. Given the deep entrenchment of global capitalism, is it viable?
- How can SJ advocates claim to speak "on behalf" of a community unless/until its members have spoken and been heard? Is advocacy earned through listening? (Is SJ theory a mode of "listening rhetoric"? Can/should it become one?)

As it turns out, contributors to this Special Issue needed no such prompts. They have their own experiences, their own concerns, their own methodologies; and, perhaps most salient, they have their own stories to tell. As one would expect from a humanities journal, "the politics of language" becomes a recurring theme. Social justice aims at action but takes language as its energy and expression. The contributors to this Special Issue each write on behalf of a community, serving as its spokesperson. Will their voices be enabled and amplified? Will their voices be ignored or, worse, forcibly silenced? Within a journal Issue on social justice, questions like these multiply.

As noted above, the *LLIDS* editors have assumed that social justice must mean different things to different people worldwide. As a means of testing this assumption, this Issue includes responses to a questionnaire distributed amongst people from different geographies and walks of life. Its writing prompts focus on individuals' prior understanding ("What is social justice for you?"); their experiences ("How have you felt wronged by society in your personal life and/or your area of work?"); and, of course, their personal narratives ("Tell us your own story about Injustices/problems you have faced").

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If allowed to speak on behalf of the journal and its editors, authors, and readers, I'd do more than offer thanks or congratulations. For it's a profoundly ethical, existential task that we have taken upon ourselves. Our work, though intellectual, is worldly. The act of writing, much like the act of speaking, makes an appeal, ethically and existentially. To speak is an appeal to be heard, and to be heard is an appeal to be seen—to be seen, that is, within one's markers of gender, ethnicity, physical ability, and social-economic status. It's to be seen within one's aspirations; it's to be seen within one's challenges and needs. And to be seen is to be made real—real in one's aspirations, real in one's needs. Any individual, group, or government that stands opposed to the appeals made on behalf of social justice will work to silence these; and if the speakers making such appeals refuse to be silenced, then they'll be demonized, dehumanized in some way. Such is the current state of politics and of its gruesome rhetorical habits.

The paradox of a global forum on social justice is that each essay contribution becomes personal and each story local—both radically individual and communitarian at once. In ways that are more than symbolic, we dwell in our varied communities in much the same way that we inhabit our bodies. Note that our living material bodies, our personal histories, and our seemingly unique, individual stories bear markers of identity that are drawn from communities. We bear these markers upon us and within us; by their means, we are made visible; through them, we can be heard. They give us substance; they make us real. To borrow a term from Kenneth Burke, we are consubstantiated with/in culture. If I may coin a word suggestive of our ethical-existential nature, I'd call us a communified species, conjoined to our fellows. In standing for social justice, we stand for our communified selves.

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