Towards a Community of Equals:
Interview with Jonathan Wolff

KHŌREIN: What does change as a concept mean and how do you understand it? What would be your philosophical approach and is there, at present, such a thing as a "theory of change?"

JONATHAN WOLFF: Although I use the idea of change in much of my writing, I have never stopped to analyse what I mean by change in a metaphysical sense. Now that you ask, I can see the need to make a distinction between significant social change and the type of ordinary movement over time that has more to do with continuity rather than change. There's also good reason to provide a more general analysis of the idea of change. When I use the term "theory of change" I do so more in a social science sense of what will enable us to make a change from where we are to where we want to go. Theories of change in this sense range from Karl Marx's idea of revolution to Karl Popper's notion of piecemeal social engineering. At this stage of my life I find myself closer to Popper than Marx, but am also coming back to the view that a somewhat richer vision is needed (not a complete ideal theory) to give direction and coherence to different changes, and to make it less likely that different changes undermine each other.

KH: Lesley Lokko begins her curatorial statement for the 18th International Architecture Exhibition in Venice with the following sentence: "What does it mean to be 'an agent of change'?" How would you answer to this question?

JW: There are many ways of being an agent of change. Often it is accidental, and not always welcome. Any of us who write and teach have the potential to change lives. Sometimes people tell me that they got started on their careers in political philosophy after reading my *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*. Of course, I'm pleased to hear this but I also have

in my head the nagging thought that maybe their lives would have gone better if they hadn't read it and set out in some other direction.

But concentrating on the question, change, or at least social change, is always brought about by human action, and while it's a bold and brave ambition to be the agent who pulls the lever to make a significant change, most of us will rarely be in a position where we can make significant changes by our own action alone. But we can, more often, facilitate change, by linking with others. For some, joining a social movement is the natural choice, for others developing new conceptual or theoretical sources, and for others making connections between existing theories developed and the needs of a movement, or even government or policy makers. Each of us has our own talents and qualities and it isn't always so important to be a leader. It's very important never to be a mindless follower, but for academics the role of wise counsellor is waiting for us, if we have to have an eye for the right opportunities and want to make the most of them. But I admit it isn't for everyone, and there's always the grave danger of doing more harm than good.

KH: In the article "Risk and the Regulation of New Technologies," you contend that "[...] new technologies can bring tremendous benefits. But they also have costs, or risks, some known, some unknown." Could you explain the correlation between new technologies and change?

JW: This reflection was not intended by me as a particularly novel thought but simply to report that the essence of new technologies is that they have the potential to bring about change. But it is always a source of wonder to me that technologies, and also new forms of social and economic organisation, often develop more quickly than our capacity to reflect on them in a systematic and mature way. Take AI right now. Large Language Models have taken many people by surprise. For example, universities, which are not normally known for moving fast, have, in some cases, changed their forms of assessment within a few months to deal with AI-assisted essay writing. You would think that universities, especially those with strong computer science departments, should have been ahead of the game on understanding the development of new AI technologies, but we've been caught out as much as everyone else.

It is interesting—but very naïve—that there has been a push for a moratorium on AI development for a few months to allow reflection on AI safety to take place. The naivety is double. First, if there's officially a

moratorium nevertheless there's a type of prisoner's dilemma structure that suggests every researcher will still keep on secretly working either in hope of getting ahead or fear of being left behind. Second, a few months might allow the production of a few high-minded statements of general position on the ethics of AI, but the time is far too short, and it's also very hard to regulate safety without, unfortunately, experience of the type of problems that occur without regulation. This is why the Ethical Owl of New Technology flies only at dusk. It's still very early days for AI, and when advances are made in regulating or modifying its use, they may well be made by people who know the technology inside out and have reflected on the ethical questions, rather than by philosophers alone who only know the technology in the most general and abstract terms. No doubt we need people from different backgrounds, with different training, to come together to help us to the next stage.

KH: You note the questions of equality and justice in the city have not been the focus of political philosophy. Why have political philosophers taken up this topic so little? Whence this lack of research dedicated to these questions, given their significance?

JW: I think it is partly path dependency—taking up the questions others have addressed—partly lack of imagination, and partly under-estimating the importance of politics at levels below the level of the state. Political philosophers have tended to imagine that their audience is the President or Prime Minister, and other government ministers. For example, their recommendations are often about tax and transfer policies, which can only be handled centrally, as can policies around immigration, just war, and many others. But as city-zens, for most of us our interaction with governments (outside of paying taxes) is much more local. Some philosophers now are showing greater understanding that there are questions of justice about such things as accessibility, the built environment, city transport policy, and local services, and a focus on cities is beginning to emerge. It has not replaced concern with policies at state level, and it shouldn't, as these remain vitally important. But more attention to justice in the city is very welcome and much needed.

KH: You wrote *City of Equals* with Avner de-Shalit. What does this titular phrase include or epitomize? You seem to be aware that it is difficult to provide a single formula.

JW: Originally we were going to call the book *The Egalitarian City*, but philosopher Hélène Landemore suggested *The City of Equals* which we decided to change to *City of Equals* and only later did we pick up on the echo of Augustine's *City of God*. To be honest, and this may be apparent from the book, we struggled even to formulate the question we wanted to answer. Officially we are asking "What makes a city a city of equals?" but that is rather abstract, so sometimes we think in terms of variants "What makes city-zens feel they are living in a city of equals?" or even "What attracts those with 'the egalitarian spirit' to particular cities?" The reason this is a puzzling question is that some of the cities that are seen as most positive by egalitarians often have stark income inequalities, such as Berkeley California. But we do come close to a single formula, when we say that a city of equals gives each of its city-zens a secure sense of belonging, although this does, of course, require considerable unpacking. We also have a slogan: In a city of equals you are proud of your city and your city is proud of (people like) you.

KH: You draw on but also criticise several pivotal concepts of social justice in the city, most notably David Harvey's. With this in mind, what would you say was your main contribution to the ongoing debate on the concept of the "just city?" How do you support the claim that the "city of equals" has a more holistic connotation?

JW: We do appreciate the contribution made by David Harvey and others, and have learnt from everyone who has written on the topic. However, our main move, and this was the idea of my co-author Avner de-Shalit, is that theorists seem not to have taken the city as in need of its own theory of justice. Instead they have taken general theories of justice and tried to apply them to the city. But our view is that this approach doesn't fit the subject matter as well as it should. Instead we have asked what's special about the city and how should we think about justice, or rather equality and inequality, specifically in that context. Bearing in mind that, for example, cities rarely have the power to raise taxes they can't address inequality through income redistribution. But they can make the city more or less liveable for members of different groups. We are not aiming for a theory that provides an account of justice for all levels and subjects matters. Rather we think we have found a theory that addresses the specificity and nuance of city life. But we hope this is an early contribution to a debate that will run, and others will want to build

on, or even reject, our account in developing alternative versions. It's a relatively neglected topic that can do with some specialised attention.

KH: The question you put forth, "what it feels like to live in a city in relation to others" opens up numerous avenues for the analysis of the socio-spatial relations as manifested in everyday urban life. Where do you see the potential for an affirmative approach to the creation of social bonds in the city based on the principles of equality? How do we imagine a "community of equals within the city?"

JW: Cities differ significantly. Residential segregation is very important. In some cities there's literally "the other side of the tracks" where minoritized people live in lower quality housing, with considerable stigma. In others while there's historic clustering—the Italian quarter, Chinatown, the Greek district—these are treated as part of the rich fabric of a "city of many flavours." Spatial relations are, of course, part of a nest of social relations and they can interact in complex ways to bring about different atmospheres and relations. Even poorer people can admire wealthy parts of the city for the quality of the architecture, and peaceful surroundings, treating those streets as a mix of museum and park, and a very pleasant place to stroll. But if there are private security guards on every corner the feeling is completely different. It all relates to our central idea: a secure sense of belonging. If you feel welcome everywhere, and people greet you in the street, or at least acknowledge your presence in a positive way, we are on the right track. We're not asking for deep community engagement by everyone—that's a matter of taste and preference—but we do hope for mutual respect, and even joy in living alongside people who are not exactly like you, and a recognition that the city belongs to everyone residing in it. That, for us, is the fundamental starting point of a city of equals.

Finally, we hope that our book is indeed an imaging of something related to a community of equals in the city: an identification of ways in which cities can and have become communities of unequals and what can be done. For myself I don't think there's a single model of equality; there are many ways of having communities of equals. What they have in common is that they overcome particular inequalities; and especially those connected with how people relate to each other.

KH: In your book *Why Read Marx Today?* we find the following claim: "The mind and the world do indeed change together." On the other

hand, we also read in it that human beings "change the world not merely by changing the way they conceptualize it but by physically transforming it." The transformation of the world also includes architectural acts. How do Marx's positions contribute to your perspective on the notions of equality and justice?

JW: Marx, notoriously, distanced himself from ideas of equality and justice, refusing to engage in this discourse, at one point suggesting that notions of equality are "hollow phrases which can be twisted and turned" (*Critique of the Gotha Programme*). At the same time he was clear that there were good and bad ways for human beings to live, emphasising the vast number of ways we rely on each other, especially through the social division of labour, that we barely even acknowledge. This idea of unacknowledged social connection is a key aspect of Marx's analysis of capitalism, and his hopes for the society of the future include making our connection with each other richer and more strongly recognised. I can't say that Marx was a regular point of reference for us in drafting *City of Equals* but his background presence was probably there clearly enough, especially in the emphasis on the ideas of community we often come back to.

KH: How can architects contribute to establishing social justice, constructing a city of equals, foster a good life within it?

JW: Probably architects are ahead of us in their thinking, or if not architects, town planners. Inequality is often about gatekeeping—both literal and metaphysical—who is allowed in, who is not, who is welcome here, who is not, and so on. Earlier trends in architecture often marked out spaces as private. The most obvious is the building of a gated community, or a shopping mall with only a few guarded entrances. But there were other crude attempts to keep people away, such as building office blocks with no sidewalks outside, or other forms of hostile architecture. We've been influenced by the idea that architects should think in the widest possible terms, rather than think that their job is simply to design buildings. For example buildings can be designed to welcome passersby to enjoy outside spaces and even make the lobbies of buildings public and widely used. For example, we consider in the book the proposal of allowing the large, often empty, ground floor entrances and lobbies of office and residential buildings to be opened up to the community, in the absence, very often now, of municipal public spaces. Architects have huge

influence over how cities feel, and how people feel treated in and by their cities, and for us this is the essence of a city of equals.

KH: The city is a political institution and also a subject that acts. You say that there are "cities with an ego" and that different cities have a "different ethos." Does their ego and ethos perhaps best manifest through architecture and urban projects or in some other way?

JW: There is no doubt that architecture and urban projects are critically important to the "ego" or "ethos" of the city. But architects can't do it alone. We conducted a series of interviews in 10 different cities in 6 different countries while researching the book. The overwhelming sense we got from our interviewees is that what matters to them is how they are treated first, by the city authorities, and second, by each other. Urban projects can make a huge difference. For example, in my street in London a new block was built with market-priced housing at the front, and social housing at the back, in accordance with the then planning laws for new city developments. The market-priced housing is approached through a lobby with a concierge, and is very clean and attractive. The social housing can only be approached through a narrow, dark alley-way at the back. There is no route from the market-priced housing. Shortly after the building was finished the alley was dug up to lay a new cable, and wasn't repaired properly, so looks very ugly. More importantly, there isn't adequate space for all the garbage for the social housing, so the bins often overflow through no fault of the residents. It doesn't get swept every day. Walking through the alley can be horrible sometimes, but the residents have no choice. This is an architecture of inequality. Those who live in the apartments will get the sense that they are second class citizens, thought to be creating filth around them, and are barely tolerated rather than welcomed. And how they feel is a consequence of how they were treated by those who designed their housing.

It's especially unfortunate also because it's a consequence of social planning for equality: having affordable accommodation in the city centre. And of course, it's still better to have these apartments there, even though mistakes have been made. One has to wonder, though, whether the architects, or perhaps the planners, deliberately planned for failure, as a type of protest against egalitarian housing schemes which presumably are less profitable for them. Perhaps they thought that if the new developments turned out badly, the local authority wouldn't insist on

them anymore, and I believe that regulations have been modified to allow developers to build social housing elsewhere rather than in the same development, which is a pity.

KH: Architecture is defined as the art of space and architects design physical objects. You claim that the question of a city of equals cannot be reduced to its spatial dimension, that is, the built environment. Why do you think that such a standpoint is limited?

JW: We do feel that the spatial dimension is very important, of course, and can influence many other factors. But it can't do everything. You can build the most wonderful museum, with space for temporary exhibitions, with the potential to allow people with different identities to celebrate their culture. But if the museum director has a snobbish attitude to the distinction between high art and low art, or the city cuts off funding, it could become an elitist institution used only by the wealthy. And one might even go as far as to say that with the right attitudes and support, spatial adversity can be overcome—people can repurpose derelict buildings or recover public spaces. Now you might say that this is simply using the spatial dimension is a new way, which is fair enough, but the general point is that we need a partnership of spaces, people, and the city authorities to build a city of equals. The spatial dimension is perhaps the easiest to think about and control, but if all our energy is taken up by thinking only about spatial elements the results could defeat our intentions.

KH: In *City of Equals*, you note the idea of eye contact in the life of the city. Why is it important for façades of public buildings—either corporate or government offices—to be made from transparent glass?

JW: We applaud some innovations to make city office buildings look less like barriers and more like open spaces. One way of doing this is to have regulations that require them to be transparent at street level, and some cities have introduced exactly these rules. The idea is to encourage connection between different citizens, rather than have some retreat to private spaces. We applaud this experiment but don't want to be dogmatic. It's important to see how it works out. If it doesn't make any difference to how people experience their connection with each other, or makes people feel uncomfortable or threatened, then the regulation should be changed, and different techniques should be tried. The last thing we want

to do is to insist on policies in the face of evidence they don't have the intended effects. But the underlying idea is that in a city of equals every citizen should have a secure sense of belonging, and the facades of buildings can, we believe, enhance or diminish that sense. Our general idea is to encourage a type of mindful planning or building, rather than think that we—philosophers rather than architects or planners—know the last word on what in detail should be done. That said, we believe that building with glass, so that people inside and outside can see each other at eye level is a very promising strategy, as it puts those inside and outside into connection, and in a sense on the same level.

KH: How much does the aesthetics, the beauty of buildings impact the relationship of citizens to their cities? To what extent is it important that citizens identify with the specific architecture of their built environment?

JW: Identifying with the architecture of one's city is a strong demand! It can, of course, happen. When a city is very beautiful or historic, or is known for a particular style of architecture many city-zens will be proud of the way their city looks and feels. But even cities of less architectural distinction can generate enormous loyalty, especially to some districts or streets. If a historic building is neglected or under threat city-zens can feel very upset, and take it as a type of personal affront, even campaigning against change. We've seen this in cases where important buildings have been destroyed by developers, sometimes by arson to avoid planning difficulties. Of course, cities constantly need to regenerate and reinvent themselves. But conservation areas, and policies such as insisting on the retention of historical facades are often very beneficial. And once more the point is not merely aesthetic, but aids the sense that the city exists for the sake of those who live there and find beauty, and sometimes even identity in their built environment. Identity is strongly related to the idea of a secure sense of belonging, and this once more leads us to the central theme of *City of Equals*.

Interview conducted by Miloš Ćipranić, Zoran Erić, and Snežana Vesnić.