

## What Is Comparative Political Theory?

*Andrew F. March*

**Abstract:** This paper examines what is involved in using comparative methods within political theory and whether there should be a comparative political theory subfield. It argues that political theory consists of multiple kinds of activities that are either primarily “scholarly” or “engaged.” It is easy to imagine how scholarly forms of political theory can be, and have been, comparative. The paper critiques (not rejects) existing calls for the creation of a comparative political theory subfield focused on the study of non-Western texts. Comparative political theory needs to explain why it is not merely expanding the canon to include non-Western texts and why a certain non-Western text is “alien,” thus justifying the moniker *comparative*. Ten discrete theses are presented that argue that the strongest warrant for an *engaged* comparative political theory is the first-order evaluation of the implication of the contestations of norms, values, and principles between distinct and coherent doctrines of thought.

*Political theories wholly removed from the controversies of their world become a banal and trivial “wisdom” literature.*

—Judith Shklar

In recent years, there has been a steady increase in the visibility of comparative political theory in the field of political science. Just over twelve years ago, there was an explicit call “to inaugurate or launch a field of inquiry which is either nonexistent or at most fledgling and embryonic in contemporary academia: the field of ‘comparative political theory’ or ‘comparative political philosophy.’ What is meant by these titles is an inquiry which, in a sustained fashion, reflects upon the status and meaning of political life no longer in a

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restricted geographical setting but in the global arena."<sup>1</sup> This research agenda has appropriated certain sympathetic previous work and has been pursued and advanced by a number of impressive scholars,<sup>2</sup> including through an energetic and intellectually diverse book series, *Global Encounters: Studies in Comparative Political Theory*.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, one can observe an increase in taught courses, research centers, and other collaborative projects that aim at some form or another of comparison or dialogue between Western and non-Western perspectives.

These are important and welcome developments, and they have reached by now a critical mass such that it is appropriate to ask in a more systematic way what it is exactly we are doing when we make political theory comparative or when we try to engage in the comparative study of political thought or ethics. The purpose of this essay is to investigate what it might mean for political theory as a practice to be comparative. This will involve primarily examining and critiquing the existing accounts of the purposes of such a subfield and

<sup>1</sup>Fred Dallmayr, "Toward a Comparative Political Theory," *The Review of Politics* 59, no. 3 (1997): 421.

<sup>2</sup>Gerald Larson and Eliot Deutsch, *Interpreting across Boundaries: New Essays in Comparative Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); Anthony Parel and Ronald C. Keith, eds., *Comparative Political Philosophy: Studies under the Upas Tree* (New Delhi and Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1992); Roxanne Euben, "Comparative Political Theory: An Islamic Fundamentalist Critique of Rationalism," *The Journal of Politics* 59, no. 1 (1997): 28–58; Euben, "Premodern, Antimodern or Postmodern? Islamic and Western Critiques of Modernity," *The Review of Politics* 49, no. 3 (1997): 429–59; Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Euben, "Contingent Borders, Syncretic Perspectives: Globalization, Political Theory, and Islamizing Knowledge," *International Studies Review* 4, no. 1 (2002): 23–48; Euben, "Killing (for) Politics: Jihad, Martyrdom, and Political Action," *Political Theory* 30, no. 1 (2002), 4–35; Euben, *Journeys to the Other Shore: Muslim and Western Travelers in Search of Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Dallmayr, *Border Crossings: Toward a Comparative Political Theory* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1999); Dallmayr, "Beyond Monologue: For a Comparative Political Theory," *Perspectives on Politics* 2, no. 2 (2004): 249–57; Brooke A. Ackerly, "Is Liberalism the Only Way Toward Democracy? Confucianism and Democracy," *Political Theory* 33, no. 4 (2005): 547–57; Farah Godrej, "Nonviolence and Gandhi's Truth: A Method for Moral and Political Arbitration," *The Review of Politics* 68, no. 2 (2006), 287–317; Godrej, "Towards a Cosmopolitan Political Thought: The Hermeneutics of Interpreting the Other," *Polity* 41 (2009): 135–65; and Leigh Jenco, "'What Does Heaven Ever Say?' A Methods-Centered Approach to Cross-Cultural Engagement," *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 4 (2007): 741–55. See also the special issue of *The Review of Politics* on comparative political theory (70, no. 1, Winter 2008) with articles by Jürgen Gebhardt, Antony Black, Anthony Parel, Richard Bernstein, and Takashi Shogimen.

<sup>3</sup>Edited by Fred Dallmayr and published through Lexington Books. The series has to this point published 19 volumes, a number of which will be referenced below.

asking in a more analytic fashion what conditions would have to obtain for the practice of political theory to be, strictly speaking, comparative.

To some, this way of framing the question might seem pedantic in its narrow focus on the term *comparative* or seem to hold comparative political theory to a higher standard of coherence and consistency than to what we hold other literatures or subfields.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, those who are primarily interested in making academic political theory more global or non-Western in focus, but have no intellectual investment in comparison as a method or the term “comparative” as a descriptive moniker for their work, might find little of interest in the rest of this essay. But that focus is appropriate, for the selection of the term “comparative” to call for a new field of inquiry within the broader discipline of political theory is neither arbitrary nor without effect. To call for a subfield labeled *comparative political theory* is at once to make a statement about its importance and about the moral and intellectual implications of the broader discipline having ignored it for so long. It invokes the status of other comparative disciplines such as comparative political science or comparative law, while at the same time obscuring some of its own more particular epistemological and normative motivations, which are not necessarily implied by the term “comparative” alone. To speak of “comparative political theory” is to claim an importance, an urgency, and a validity within the broader fields of political theory and political science. Such an importance, urgency, and validity may indeed be in order. But it is not a trivial claim. In any event, the long overdue globalization of (Anglophone) political theory is well under way in many forms. It is important that we clarify both our normative and our methodological assumptions.

Two preliminary steps are in order. First, the fruitful, fortunate, and productive absence of a settled consensus on the meaning and purpose of political theory as a vocation must be pointed out, and its implications for speaking of a “comparative political theory” discussed. Second, it might be asked whether there is anything novel or innovative in the idea that political theory should be comparative. Since when have students of politics confined themselves to a single area of concern or tradition of thought? Have political theorists not always sought inspiration in the differences between cultures and countries? Have they not always put different thinkers and traditions into conversations with one another? Isn't existing political theory already comparative *now*?

### **Political Theory: A Useful Organizational Fiction, Not a (Single) Discipline**

Of course, the first thing to be observed is that there is no single such thing as political theory. “Political theory” is the name given within the academy to a

<sup>4</sup>I would like to thank Margaret Kohn for raising this concern.

number of different types of intellectual activities, some of them mutually hostile, which have in common only the fact that they do not aim at empirical explanation or prediction and instead deal with the realms of ideas, concepts, texts, values, and norms.

I think five broad types of activities more or less account for the range of pursuits of those who might be willing to describe their profession as political theory:

1. *Normative political philosophy* in search of justifiable norms, beliefs, policies, or institutions, whether analytic, critical, or historical-traditional;<sup>5</sup>
2. *Critical analysis and interpretation*, which in some way or another aims at exposing the hidden, denied, unrecognized, or unacknowledged underneath the visible, the apparent, or the hegemonic;
3. *The history of political thought*, including intellectual history, Begriffsgeschichte, and the study of important thinkers;
4. *Conceptual analysis* at the intersection of philosophy, intellectual history, and social science;
5. *The study of forms of political thought and speech* at the intersection of discourse analysis, linguistics, social science, psychology, speech-act theory, and the study of political ideologies.

One suggestion about this typology might be submitted at this point. Using political theory as a master category or concept for a number of methodologically distinct activities, we can distinguish between political theory as a “scholarly” activity and as an “engaged” activity. This dichotomy, like all, is imperfect and subject to many counterexamples of hybridity for which scholarship is a prerequisite for engaged judgment. However, there are exercises of political theory which seek to analyze some kind of data (political ideas, speech-acts, texts), the purpose of which is greater knowledge about the data itself (Plato’s *Republic*) or about some more general political phenomenon (e.g., how is imperialism defended?). Scholarly political theory is primarily aimed at investigating whether we *understand well enough* a given text, practice, or phenomenon. It is likely to overlap with social science, history, and the humanities. Other exercises of political theory, using the variable methods introduced above (analytic argumentation, psychoanalysis, immanent critique, cultural or discourse analysis, etc.), are primarily aimed at revealing the *value* (however understood and appraised) of a given institutional scheme, theory, system, idea, value, practice, or conception.

<sup>5</sup>This last category is meant as a catch-all for theorists who unmistakably defend identifiable normative orientations but do so not through analytic argumentation but through the close identification with political traditions, say the American democratic or civic tradition.

Engaged political theory is primarily aimed at investigating whether some set of ideas are the *right ideas for us*. It is likely to overlap with various types of philosophy.

The question of whether political theory can or ought to be in some meaningful and interesting way comparative will then depend very much on what kind of activity or activities are thought to be the task of political theory. My argument in this article does not proceed by claiming that any of the above methods, activities, or schools has the best claim to be called “political theory”; I take for granted that many different schools and types of activity will continue to consider themselves (or acquiesce in being considered) part of the academic discipline of political theory. Thus, I begin with the assumption that a call for a distinctly comparative political theory cannot ignore this fact: comparative political theory either needs to pitch itself to the entire field or (more likely) show where fruitful roles for comparison lie in individual types of political theory.

Anticipating some of my later arguments, I would suggest that it is easy to see how countless genuinely comparative research questions can be generated from within any of the main *scholarly* forms of political theory. Indeed, comparison of numerous cases is the obvious method for answering questions of the type “How is *x* achieved, experienced, or performed by various actors?” where *x* can stand for: legitimating power and authority, transmitting unpopular opinions through texts safely in times of persecution, mobilizing restless groups, constructing and normalizing hegemonic conceptions of consciousness and agency, countering and undermining hegemonic conceptions of consciousness and agency, performing gender roles, and so on. Indeed, I would submit that much of the important, high-quality applied work published under the banner of comparative political theory (such as within the Global Encounters book series) takes one form or another of scholarly political theory.<sup>6</sup> Here there is no mystery as to what is comparative about comparative political theory.<sup>7</sup> I believe that the most interesting and

<sup>6</sup>E.g., Fred Dallmayr and José M. Rosales, eds., *Beyond Nationalism? Sovereignty and Citizenship* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2001); Margaret Chatterjee, *Hinterlands and Horizons: Excursions in Search of Amity* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002); Jennifer S. Holmes, ed., *New Approaches to Comparative Politics: Insights from Political Theory* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003); Susan J. Henders, *Democratization and Identity: Regimes and Ethnicity in East and Southeast Asia* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004); Jessé Souza and Valter Sinder, eds., *Imagining Brazil* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005); and Takashi Shogimen and Cary J. Nederman, eds., *Western Political Thought in Dialogue with Asia* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008). All strike me as particularly good examples of this mode of comparative political theory.

<sup>7</sup>Along the lines of these observations, there have been other calls recently to engage in the comparative study of political thought, one which emerges from the study of political ideologies and political thought and speech as quasi-empirical social

difficult questions are whether and how “engaged” political theory might be comparative in a meaningful and rigorous way.

### Is Political Theory Ever *Not* Comparative?

In many senses that which we (Anglophone academics) call “political theory” has always involved comparison. The briefest survey of the history of Western political thought—from Plato’s and Aristotle’s comparison of different types of regimes to Foucault’s efforts to expose the different modes of power-knowledge representative of different places and historical periods—will confirm this.<sup>8</sup>

Even when one speaks not of the canon but of the twentieth- and twenty-first-century academic discipline of political theory, the situation does not seem to change. Comparative studies of important thinkers, diachronic studies of thinking on particular topics or problems both within and across societies, Begriffsgeschichte-style or genealogical studies of the origins and evolutions of concepts and categories, the study of political ideologies and vernacular political thought, and the comparative study of colonial and postcolonial discourses are all legitimate and popular exercises in academic political theory. In addition, one of the further implications of

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phenomena. Oxford political theorist Michael Freeden, the founder and editor of *Journal of Political Ideologies*, argues that “political theory needs to reacquaint itself with the features of politics and reassert itself as a branch of social studies. In that capacity, one aspect of that reassertiveness is the need at least to think about whether we could usefully take a leaf out of the work of political comparativists in the areas of government and policy, and seek to advance the investigation of political thought through the elaboration and testing of analytical categories of comparison, both temporal and spatial” (Michael Freeden, “The Comparative Study of Political Thinking,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 12, no. 1 [2007]: 1). Thus, Freeden declares clearly and coherently that the kind of political theory that he thinks can most benefit from a comparative method is a scholarly form (rather than an engaged one), one which aims at greater knowledge of certain kinds of practices and phenomena, namely, “detectable and decodable instances of talking and writing: the external expression of political thinking.” Political theorists might thus study comparatively modes of direct persuasion or the use of concepts, symbols, and speech to establish hegemony over social contexts (à la Lukes’s “third dimension of power” [Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1974)]). Or they might study (as, of course, we already do) the variable rules of political argumentation, the place of rhetoric, the techniques for mobilizing emotion, the allocation of significance for competing political values, and the diversity of conceptions of politics in competition with other spheres of human activity.

<sup>8</sup>Indeed, Roxanne Euben argues that comparison is essential to all acts of theorizing and thus that comparative political theory is as much a return to origins as a new departure (*Journeys to the Other Shore*, 10, 13, and the entire argument in chap. 2.).

there being no single, core, identifiable discipline of political theory is that much of the work one associates with political theory is done in the fields of law, ethics, sociology, anthropology, and religious studies, all of which have well-established comparative methods. Comparative methods are thus already assumed to be part of the wide, variable, and diverse forms of activity that for disciplinary-organization purposes go under the name “political theory.”

What do all of these projects assume for comparison to be part of the agenda? The first assumption is that there is a *specific common object of inquiry*. Meaningful and interesting comparative work is not a zoological cataloguing of diversity, but rather aims at a specific problem or question that is illuminated through multiple examples (“How is liberty protected through institutions? How is it protected through *moeurs*?” “How do different modes of knowing and the practices and institutions in which they are embodied create and limit human subjectivity?”). Or perhaps there is a single concept, practice, or phenomenon (liberalism, imperialism, democracy, sovereignty, constitutionalism, marriage, etc.) about which we know more and about which we ask new questions by examining multiple instances of it. Comparison must be, in the first place, a method, not just an expedient term vaguely suggesting the focus of one’s research interests (e.g., non-Western texts) or substantive concerns and commitments (e.g., critiquing Western hegemony). Those foci and substantive concerns may be legitimate and important, but they need not amount to a distinctively comparative method. Indeed, comparison might be exactly the wrong way to open up political theorizing to global-democratic, counter-hegemonic purposes. The two most intuitive ways in which political theory might globalize itself and undermine hegemonic institutions would be some form of global Habermasian ideal-speech situation or a more radical perpetual critique from the perspective of the world’s dominated populations. Neither of those, however, is particularly comparative and, I suggest, may in fact run directly against some of the assumptions of comparative political theory.

The second assumption is *distinction*: comparison occurs between distinct units or entities. Some feature must distinguish two objects of study (thinkers, traditions, theories, concepts, and speech-acts) from one another such that comparison is not only possible but meaningful. This seems like, and is, a fairly low bar to cross, but I will show that confusion about what makes a text or thinker part of *comparative* political theory (as opposed to political theory *proper*) is endemic to writing on the subject. For comparison itself to be the main methodological tool, there have to be not only distinct units, but their differences also have to be somehow enduring and generative of knowledge or insights greater than what is derived from treating them in noncomparative ways. In contrast to the boundaries between countries, societies, or legal systems, the distinctions between thoughts, ideas, values, norms, arguments, and traditions are not always clear. Nor is it clear that the fact of boundaries or disparate origins is the most relevant feature for the philosophers, historians, and critical theorists who comprise the community of political theorists.

However, the comparative political theory project as represented mostly by U.S.-based scholars is not always described in precisely this clear, problem-centered way. For these scholars, what is crucial are not methods, problems, or specific questions, but rather the imperative to study thought grounded in certain civilizations, or broad cultural traditions, from outside the West. There is no doubt that all political thought and all political experiences from all parts of the globe ought to be studied by political scientists and theorists. *Nothing in this article ought to be read as the slightest critique of studying and teaching texts and thought from outside the West or as an effort to downgrade the status of such texts and thought.* Clearly, the scholarly study of non-Western political thought could (and does) proceed perfectly well in a noncomparative way, both within area studies and within political theory. I suspect that many people drawn to the comparative political theory banner actually are primarily interested in studying non-Western thinkers and traditions in their own terms.

### The Comparative Political Theory Project

What is meant, first and foremost, by “comparative” in the present call for a particular subfield is that political theory ought to expand its curricular and research focus beyond the traditional canon, concepts, and concerns of Western political theory to include non-Western perspectives. However, accounts of the purposes, motivations, and justifications for the existence of a distinct subfield called “comparative political theory” insist that the goal is not merely to globalize the focus of political theorists so that Islamic, Indian, Latin American, African, or East Asian political thought would now appear on the radar screen of professional journals and search committees. The justifications are often more ambitious and tend to coalesce around the following five themes: the *epistemic*, *global-democratic*, *critical-transformative*, *explanatory-interpretative*, and the *rehabilitative*.

#### *Epistemic*

If theory and philosophy are to be universal, expanding the canon of political theory by bringing in non-Western perspectives is asserted to be an intellectual, political, and moral imperative in itself. Fred Dallmayr (invoking Heidegger, Gadamer, and Derrida) writes that “the point of comparative political theory, in my view, is precisely to move toward a more genuine universalism, and beyond the spurious ‘universality’ traditionally claimed by the Western canon and by some recent intellectual movements.”<sup>9</sup> Roxanne Euben similarly argues that “the project of comparative political theory

<sup>9</sup>Dallmayr, “Beyond Monologue,” 253.



involves bringing non-Western perspectives into familiar debates into the problems of living together, thus assuring that political theory is about human and not merely Western dilemmas. It is perhaps best understood as a hybrid of the contemporary disciplines of political theory and comparative politics, for it entails the attempt to ask questions about the nature and value of politics in a variety of cultural and historical contexts.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the first argument for comparative political theory is an *epistemic* one: political theory (and perhaps comparative political science) can make no claims for their universality without including non-Western perspectives. However, for this claim it is not the civilizational identity of a value or concept which is central, but the epistemic value in encountering the alien: "One of the main benefits of comparative study for political theory is the ability to rekindle the critical *élan* endemic to political philosophy since the time of Socrates and Plato but likely to be extinguished by canonization. Moving from the habitually familiar toward the unfamiliar will help to restore the sense of 'wondering' (*thaumazein*) that the ancients extolled as pivotal to philosophizing."<sup>11</sup>

To avoid the risk of remaining at the level of platitude, some scholars make the effort to show that we are depriving ourselves of substantive ethical knowledge about political life because certain non-Western writers have done it better (or simply differently) than Western ones. Thus, the argument is that we may have something to learn of a first-order nature from theorists we have arbitrarily excluded from our canon. Gandhi is, of course, a popular figure here, as is Rabindranath Tagore. Gandhi's views on tolerance, religious pluralism, and civil disobedience are often invoked as bearing an independent normative force outside of their original cultural context. Recently, Farah Godrej has argued intriguingly that his views on using the political as a sphere for a deliberate encounter between rival metaphysical truth-claims is a superior alternative to Rawlsian public reason.<sup>12</sup> In a wide-ranging and ambitious book, *Conversations and Transformations: Toward a New Ethics of Self and Society* (published within Fred Dallmayr's book series *Global Encounters*), Ananta Kumar Giri puts Western and Indian thinkers in conversation to contribute to universal philosophical debates on topics such as the ethics of argumentation, responsibility and politics, gender, exclusion and integration, well-being, justice, civil society, and identity politics.<sup>13</sup> The Asian values and human rights debate has similarly always been conducted on a plateau of respect for the communitarian ethos of some East Asian societies. More recently, Brooke Ackerly suggests that Confucianism might

<sup>10</sup>Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror*, 9.

<sup>11</sup>Dallmayr, "Beyond Monologue," 254.

<sup>12</sup>Godrej, "Nonviolence and Gandhi's Truth."

<sup>13</sup>Ananta Kumar Giri, *Conversations and Transformations: Toward a New Ethics of Self and Society* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002).

not only provide a legitimate basis for democracy for China but also hold some lessons for the West: "Confucianism offers democratic theorists an alternative to the liberal democratic Western intellectual history of democratic practice and thus offers an alternative set of values that may be used to develop political community in Western liberal democracies. Confucianism offers a way of respecting, and a justification for politically protecting, the humanity of people without disconnecting them from the familial and other social bonds that sustain their humanity."<sup>14</sup>

### *Global-Democratic*

This general claim is enhanced by the further claim that the need for a better universalism is a special obligation given globalization; both common philosophizing and cross-cultural understanding are imperative in a globalized world. Dallmayr defines comparative political theory as "a mode of theorizing that takes seriously the ongoing process of globalization, a mode which entails, among other things, the growing proximity and interpretation of cultures."<sup>15</sup> "This analysis suggests that the attempt to view the world through non-Western eyes requires attending to how the interpenetration of cultural forms in an increasingly globalized world is polyvalent. In doing so, it at once problematizes the notion of a non-Western perspective and suggests the difficulty of marking off distinctively Western ways of knowing. Questioning presuppositions . . . takes these borders as appropriate subjects of analysis rather than as premises of it."<sup>16</sup> If the most important questions of contemporary political philosophy are themselves of a global nature, how could a "planetary political philosophy" (as Dallmayr calls it) proceed except by including a planet's worth of theoretical perspectives? This argument might thus be referred to as the *global-democratic* argument for comparative political theory.

### *Critical-Transformative*

However, this universal (almost power-neutral) claim about the place of a comparative political theory is often linked to a set of particular postcolonial claims about the nature of theoretical and philosophical discourse. In this view, existing liberal or Western concepts, categories, and truth-claims are not merely insufficient for global theorizing, but part (or more) of the problem to be solved. Dallmayr writes that "in contrast to hegemonic and imperialist modes of theorizing, the term [comparative political theory]

<sup>14</sup>Ackerly, "Is Liberalism the Only Way Toward Democracy?" 548. Emphasis added.

<sup>15</sup>Dallmayr, "Beyond Monologue," 249.

<sup>16</sup>Euben, "Contingent Borders, Syncretic Perspectives," 46–47.

implies that one segment of the world's population cannot monopolize the language or idiom of the emerging 'village,' or global civil society."<sup>17</sup> Euben says that "in a postcolonial world, questions we take to be ours have ceased to be exclusively so (if they ever were) because they also have come to frame the sensibilities of so called non-Westerners."<sup>18</sup> In this view, extending Western frames and concepts to non-Western contexts is not just mistaken but is an act of hegemony and domination that ought to be counteracted by exploring the ways in which non-Western thinkers discuss political questions. Comparative political theory thus often draws on the *critical-transformative* motivation theorized by postcolonial studies.

### *Explanatory-Interpretive*

A fourth claim is that studying non-Western perspectives illuminates common problems at the intersection of political theory and comparative politics. Brooke Ackerly, for example, has argued that a careful study of Confucian thought can throw light on the question of whether liberalism is a prerequisite for democracy. She writes that "comparative political theory can help us bring to light the theoretical resources within various contexts for theorizing about democracy. For example, is there a theoretical alternative to liberalism that could guide the development of institutional possibilities for preventing the abuse of political power while supporting democracy? Are there ways of fostering community bonds that do not sacrifice some individuals to the community?" These actions will "inspire our curiosity about the vibrant theoretical discussions about democracy taking place in Chinese."<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Euben argues that a study of Islamic fundamentalist thinker Sayyid Qutb ought to be of interest to social scientists working on religious movements for "interpretive accounts not only make fundamentalist ideas intelligible but also contribute to current social science explanations of the increasing power of Islamic fundamentalism by making them causally adequate."<sup>20</sup> In another article, Euben uses Hannah Arendt's conception of the pursuit of immortality through political action to situate jihad and martyrdom in Islam.<sup>21</sup> This argument for comparative political theory seeks to make it relevant for social science or practical theorizing, but only by displaying the results of textual interpretation. I will refer to it contingently as the *explanatory-interpretative* motivation for comparative political theory.

<sup>17</sup>Dallmayr, "Beyond Monologue," 249.

<sup>18</sup>Euben, "Contingent Borders, Syncretic Perspectives," 26.

<sup>19</sup>Ackerly, "Is Liberalism the Only Way Toward Democracy?" 548.

<sup>20</sup>Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror*, 156.

<sup>21</sup>Euben, "Killing (for) Politics."

### *Rehabilitative*

While most of the impetus for calling for a comparative political theory in the above points derives from the fact of difference, a fifth theme in the justification of this subfield is the possible *similarity* between the views of non-Western and Western writers. Often, comparative political theory seeks to demystify the divide between contemporary Western standards and the views or practices of a non-Western tradition. The underlying message is that a non-Western thinker, religion, culture, or tradition has been unfairly branded as more illiberal, irrational, monolithic, alien, or antidemocratic than is really the case. Dallmayr is quite explicit that “in large measure, comparative political theory—like comparative philosophy and comparative humanities—is an attempt to prove Huntington’s thesis wrong. Of course, no one can rule out the possibility of cultural clashes or conflicts; but the thesis cannot be allowed to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. In lieu of the Huntingtonian scenario, comparative inquiry places the emphasis on cross-cultural encounters, mutual learning, and (what has been called) ‘dialogue among civilizations.’”<sup>22</sup> However, this role for comparative theory of structuring cross-cultural understanding or mutual interpretation sometimes consists in nothing more than pointing to similarities or equivalences across political cultures. Anthony Parel, for example, has pointed to the similarity of “the Aristotelian *politikos* and the Confucian *junzi*, Indian dharma and the premodern Western notion of ‘natural justice,’ [and] the Islamic prophet-legislator and the Platonic philosopher king.”<sup>23</sup>

The point here is not so much to justify a given norm or practice (democracy, human rights, feminism) by showing that it can be affirmed by multiple traditions (to anticipate: this is one role for comparative political theory that I endorse and seek to defend in this article), but to *rehabilitate* a non-Western tradition or trend by showing that it is less alien or hostile than its crudest opponents charge. This, of course, is a common theme in writings about Islam and “Asian values” which often take the form of showing that Islam is less antidemocratic or anticonstitutionalist,<sup>24</sup> and that Confucianism is less hostile to human rights and democracy than is often claimed.<sup>25</sup> Or

<sup>22</sup>Fred Dallmayr, ed., preface to *Comparative Political Theory: An Introduction* (forthcoming).

<sup>23</sup>Parel, *Comparative Political Philosophy*, 12.

<sup>24</sup>Aziza Y. al-Hibri, “Islamic Constitutionalism and the Concept of Democracy,” in Dallmayr, *Border Crossings*, 61–88; and M. A. Muqtedar Khan, ed., *Islamic Democratic Discourse: Theory, Debates, and Philosophical Perspectives* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006).

<sup>25</sup>Dallmayr, “‘Asian Values’ and Global Human Rights,” *Philosophy East and West* 52, no. 2 (2002): 173–89; Ackerly, “Is Liberalism the Only Way Toward Democracy?”; Russell Arben Fox, “Confucianism and Communitarianism in a Liberal Democratic World,” in Dallmayr, *Border Crossings*, 185–212; and L. H. M. Ling and Chih-yu

perhaps that certain practices like Islamic veiling are not antithetical to all conceptions of agency, freedom, and modernity.<sup>26</sup>

However, what I am calling the *rehabilitative* motivation for comparative political theory need not involve arguing that alien thinkers or traditions are more liberal than we thought, merely that they are less alien. Euben's remarks on the political thought of Sayyid Qutb, for example, are not designed to show that Qutb was a crypto-liberal democrat but rather that "Qutb is participating in a conversation [against post-Enlightenment rationalism] that we, as Western students of politics, not only recognize, but in which we participate."<sup>27</sup> The "comparative" element in Euben's study largely consists in the claim that Qutb is echoing many of the criticisms of post-Enlightenment rationality encountered in such thinkers as Arendt, MacIntyre, Taylor, Neuhaus, and Bellah. The conclusion is that we should see him as less alien, less idiosyncratic, less antirationalist, and less irrelevant to our understanding of modernity because that is the courtesy we extend Western critics of modernity.<sup>28</sup> However, unlike the aforementioned contributions of Godrej and Giri, Euben leaves vague the question of what exactly Qutb's contribution to this dialogue is and what we are supposed to be doing with it.<sup>29</sup>

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Shih, "Confucianism with a Liberal Face: Democratic Politics in Post-Colonial Taiwan," in Dallmayr, *Border Crossings*, 213–36.

<sup>26</sup>Nancy Hirschmann, "Eastern Veiling, Western Freedom?" in Dallmayr, *Border Crossings*, 39–60.

<sup>27</sup>Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror*, 155.

<sup>28</sup>"The West is itself riven with disagreements and ambivalences about modernity and rationalism . . . [which] belie characterizations of a coherent West better able to cope with doubt, with a human centered universe, with radical uncertainty than others. . . . [And] Islamic fundamentalist ideas such as Qutb's and the sensibility they express are not premodern, although they often draw upon and reinterpret ideals located in a golden past. And although such Islamic fundamentalist political thought coheres around a critique of epistemological assumptions many take to be constitutive of post-Enlightenment modernity, it must be understood as modern, both in the historical sense and in the sense in which it is profoundly engaged with the processes and ideas we associate with both modernity and 'modernism.' Furthermore, as disparate Western voices continue to express similar anxieties about modernity and the costs of post-Enlightenment rationalism, it is not particularly illuminating to argue that fundamentalists such as Qutb are antimodernists, unless we are willing to call all critics of modernity antimodern" (Euben, "Premodern, Antimodern or Postmodern?" 435–36).

<sup>29</sup>Why do we need, for example, Sayyid Qutb to know that modernity and rationality can be contested? One wonders, first, why studying, say, Arendt's versus Taylor's critiques of modernity or liberalism is not part of comparative political theory, but studying Qutb's is. Further, what is the added value of the "comparative" claim that Qutb or modern Islamic fundamentalism is more complex than the

Thus, the precise impetus behind, and the moral or epistemic stakes involved in, observing these similarities is vague or undertheorized. Why we should care that certain concepts or claims seem to have analogues or equivalences across space and time is not usually explained. It thus seems that the main purpose in drawing these comparisons is merely appreciative or rehabilitative in the sense of combating the notions that all good ideas have come from Western writers and that non-Western traditions are characterized essentially by their least sophisticated manifestations (which are the ones often most accessible to Western audiences).

We may make at this point one general observation: all of these purposes and themes have in mind the study of non-Western (high) political philosophy or theorizing. That is, in the main theoretical statements on the purpose of comparative political theory there is less echoing of Michael Freedman's claims (see note 7 above) that the object of comparative study is political thought as a ubiquitous human activity in all its forms—high and low, elite and popular—than there is a call to bring in non-Western thought as something that we ought to value, that is, as something on par with Plato, Machiavelli, Tocqueville, Arendt, and Rawls, and which we might thus compare with high-Western thought.

In other words, while there are ecumenical nods to all sorts of purposes, and not all exercises in comparative political theory display these commitments (as I suggested above, most work in comparative political theory is a straightforward exercise in some form of scholarly political theory), a recurring suggestion in the comparative political theory literature is that it is needed for us *qua* holders of normative beliefs and truth-claims, not us *qua* value-neutral students of the patterns of political thought and speech. While the “political theory” part of comparative political theory is often left vague and no form or method of theorizing expressly rejected or accepted,<sup>30</sup> some form of *engaged* political theory is what is implied most strongly—a conception of political theory at the intersection of normative political philosophy and critical analysis. Studying new texts and thinkers from outside the West has the capacity to change our present opinions about our normative commitments, their scope and epistemic status, and the social and institutional conditions for their realization.

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antimodern caricature of some form of the clash-of-civilizations thesis, which we know because his critique of rationality is a quintessentially modern enterprise rather than something inherent to Islam? It seems that the main purpose of the claim is merely to rehabilitate Islamic fundamentalism by saying that certain hostile labels (*irrational*, *antimodern*, *utterly alien*) ought not to be applied to thinkers like Qutb.

<sup>30</sup>The excellent aforementioned book series, *Global Encounters: Studies in Comparative Political Theory*, displays a remarkable breadth of method, purpose, and geographical focus.

Many of the claims or motivations described above are, on their own, unassailable. Who today would deny the value of studying non-Western philosophical, ethical, and political perspectives? Who today would assert with confidence that concepts and categories developed in European and North American societies are necessarily applicable to other societies? Who today would deny that European and North American societies have defined for themselves and others the dominant normative understandings of contemporary philosophical concepts? Who today would deny that Western societies are served by a richer understanding of other cultures? Who today would deny that greater cross-cultural understanding, indeed greater knowledge of any kind, is in itself a good?

However, certain ambiguities can quickly be discerned in the comparative political theory literature. Some common tropes or implications are that it is enough for comparative political theory to point to the mere existence of moral disagreement—that the simple fact of disagreement serves to render existing norms problematic.<sup>31</sup> Or that it is enough in scholarly terms to demonstrate or suggest that a value-conflict can be “understood as” a challenge to existing liberal or secular norms, or to demonstrate (note: to fellow Westerners) that some religious or cultural tradition or civilization is somehow more complex or polyvalent than the most simplistic caricatures of that tradition.

Yet, it is not always explained whether comparative political theory calls for us to read non-Western authors and examine non-Western views the way we are entitled to read and study Western ones (critically, un sentimentally, and even disrespectfully if we so wish), or whether their “alien” status requires that we treat them differently—with both more, and thus less, respect. It is often asserted that the fact of disagreement (with liberalism or some other

<sup>31</sup>This recalls much of the debate over whether all contested or contestable concepts are philosophically essentially contested concepts. To the extent that there is affinity, we might pose a version of John Gray’s challenge: “To characterize a concept as ‘essentially contested’ may be (and in all relevant contexts must be) to do more than to report its cultural and historical variability and to record the fact that its correct application has long been a matter of dispute—at least if such a characterization is to be nontruistic and if it is to succeed at once in capturing and in going some distance toward explaining the intractability of disputes about its use. That is, it cannot be the *criterion* of a concept’s essential contestability that its users are culturally and historically variant if the fact of its variability (often cited as *evidence* of its contestability) is to be accounted for at all satisfactorily. All interesting and important contestability theses go far beyond this weak version in which the fact of a concept’s contestability can be established by empirical means alone, and in which a concept’s contestability is, indeed, constituted by its ‘contestedness.’ It is necessary to distinguish clearly between this weak, empirical version and the stronger version that a given application of a concept is ‘contestable’” (John Gray, “On the Contestability of Social and Political Concepts,” *Political Theory* 5, no. 3 [1977]: 338).

so-called Western value) emerging from a non-Western text is sufficient warrant for writing on this text, but rarely is that source given the same first-order critical treatment as a Western one. Non-Western texts are thus both asserted to be in a dialogue with us but also assumed to have to be treated in their own terms. There is a hint that we may have something to learn from this or that writer being discussed, but often the claim goes no further than that he or she is merely evidence of the existence of a certain debate. Thus, a great irony of the comparative political theory discourse is that non-Western texts are often not given enough weight in the sense of not being seen as eligible for the same critical rejection as a Western one would (for doing so might be regarded as a reassertion of the priority and hegemony of Western concepts). However, they are also often given too much weight in the sense of being called on to represent a certain civilization's, culture's, or religion's difference from (and/or similarity with) so-called Western values.

Finally, it is not clear that the main theoretical and moral goals elaborated above have anything to do with comparison between civilizational world-views per se. Why would the global-democratic ambition not be better served by some global version of Habermasian discourse ethics between moral contemporaries? Why would the critical and epistemic ambition not be better served by some more radical, postcolonial, third-world perspectivism that would hold, like the Marxist view of a special epistemic status for the proletariat or certain feminist claims for a special epistemic status for women, that non-Western critiques of a given Western norm or practice have a certain presumption of truth because they see it for what it is, stripped bear of its ideological dressing?

Thus, if comparative political theory is going to claim more than scholarly ambitions and seek to contribute to various forms of engaged political theory, then I believe that certain areas of vagueness and internal contradiction need to be addressed head-on.

### **Is Engaged Political Theory Ever Comparative?**

In what follows, I seek to evaluate a single claim: there ought to be a project arising out of engaged political theory that is comparative in method. A further criterion might be added to this claim: such a project ought to be able to command the respect of other political theorists who are not necessarily interested in the specific thinker or non-Western tradition that is the object of study by setting out criteria for the evaluation of the theoretical and philosophical claims advanced through this kind of work. To be very clear: I am *not* evaluating whether the study of single thinkers or of non-Western traditions has value per se (I assume that it is either obvious that it does or, like so much in academia, a question of taste). I am not seeking to defend an evaluative hierarchy between various academic disciplines or subdisciplines, nor am I questioning the value or success of the



many *scholarly* exercises of comparative political theory. Thus, the following theses all address the central question of whether political theory can and/or should be both engaged and comparative in its method and purpose, whether the cultural and civilizational identity of texts and thought is a sufficient warrant for comparison, and whether the methodologies and agendas proposed to this point fill existing scholarly gaps, bearing in mind that the main proponents of comparative political theory have revealed ambitious normative and critical aspirations. I endorse and share the search for justifiable normative beliefs and truth-claims as one task of an engaged political theory (philosophy), but wonder when precisely this is compatible with the picture of political theory as an essentially comparative activity.

In order to evaluate this claim, I will proceed by laying out and elaborating a series of theses that I believe reveal what it would mean for engaged political theory to be comparative, bearing in mind what I have argued about all comparative projects requiring both a conception of meaningful *distinction* and a *common object of inquiry*.

1. *Comparative political theory ought to be distinguishable from anthropology and area studies.* Naturally, the best comparative political theorists will be scholars who, through their knowledge of languages and scholarly debates, can enjoy the respect of experts in various area studies fields. However, those scholarly communities already include the study of political thought as part of their disciplinary mission. Presumably, the project of comparative political theory involves more than either the production of more experts in Chinese, Indian, Islamic, African, and Latin American political thought or the publication of their research in political theory and political science journals.

However, comparative political theorists have to show why *comparing* the ideas or concepts of different civilizations and traditions or borrowing the methodologies and concepts of Western political theory (which, make no mistake, is what comparative political theory does) to analyze non-Western texts is appropriate. More gravely, the challenge is to show what is to be gained from this in philosophical terms. Often, comparison (*qua* analogy) is helpful in conveying information to a new audience (e.g., “The Islamic debate on the moral status of acts before revelation is much like Western state of nature thinking”). However, this is a problem of pedagogy, or an example of interdisciplinary conceptual borrowing, rather than the creation of new kind of discipline with normative and critical aspirations. A prospective discipline of comparative political theory, however, would seem to have to explain why its results are of interest to readers not necessarily having an independent, noncomparative interest in the specific non-Western writer or tradition being studied. Thus, one aspect of comparative political theory’s being comparative is its capacity to explain why we should be interested in heretofore neglected (non-Western) texts.

What can comparative political theory say to the skeptic who denies that he has anything to learn from thinkers not part of the tradition of argument about which he cares?<sup>32</sup>

One obvious claim advanced by comparative political theory is that the “Western canon” is woefully incomplete without the views of non-Western thinkers arbitrarily excluded. That is, there are many texts out there which are valuable in their own right and not just because they belong to a particular subaltern tradition. This claim is certainly true. However, for the purpose of justifying a *comparative* political theory it has problems, expressed by my second thesis.

2. *If the interest in non-Western political thought is grounded in the belief that we might have something to learn about political and social life from writers outside the Western canon, then it becomes less clear what is being compared.* If we might have as much to learn from Lao Tzu, Kautilya, Ibn Khaldun, or Gandhi as from Plato, Machiavelli, Milton, and Foucault, then why not go a step further and simply deny that these writers are alien to us? (Indeed, why should we assume that a writer in ancient Greece or Renaissance Florence is anything *but* alien to us?) So if the thinkers that proponents of comparative political theory want to bring in to our purview are valuable in themselves, it is presumably because of something not reducible to their cultural, religious, or civilizational identity (even if it is the fact of that identity which is the cause of their being excluded and obscured for so long in the West). In this case, the moniker *comparative* is not only superfluous, but might be read as somewhat patronizing rather than inclusive. We do not read Sun Tzu alongside Clausewitz in order to advance a comparative martial studies. Why should we relegate Ibn Khaldun, if he is the original and transcultural thinker some Western scholars believe him to be, to the canon of comparative political theory or Islamic political thought? We should study and teach him alongside Thucydides, Hobbes, and Weber. Thus, a large part of the motivation behind comparative political theory does not seem to be comparative at all, but rather better characterized as expanding (whilst decentering) the canon. The aforementioned works by Farah Godrej and Ananta Kumar Giri strike me as exactly this kind of project: dissolving boundaries by asking the same questions of authors and traditions not normally put into conversation, with the assumption, for example, that Gandhi, Tagore, and others might not only

<sup>32</sup>Let us pause here. A possible rejoinder at this point is to say, “The purpose of the comparative political project is actually to create the demand or the intellectual cover within the broader discipline for research on non-Western thought. The word ‘comparative’ is not central here intellectually, but if it catches on then it will be easier for scholars to publish on neglected writers and traditions and to be taken seriously by other academics.” That may be true, and it may indeed be great if scholars writing on neglected topics have their path smoothed. But such a don’t-throw-the-baby-out-with-the-bathwater rejoinder would confirm much of my critique in this paper.

be part of the same conversation as Rawls and Taylor, but actually advancing it.<sup>33</sup>

There is a graver problem with this motive for comparative political theory when we are dealing with long-deceased writers, one which intersects the above concerns about the relationship to area studies. If the motive is to bring into an active and living dialogue about politics heretofore neglected writers or traditions, specifically ones from non-Western geographical spaces, then the scholar is a priori and professionally committed to the conclusion that the writer in question has something to say to those of us outside of his original context. But that might result in poor scholarly treatment of the texts in question. Ought it not to be the object of scholarly debate precisely whether a writer is calling across (or speaking in code across) the mountaintops, or rather engaged in speech acts which can only be appreciated in light of the writer's thick immediate context?<sup>34</sup> Certainly, intellectual historians (whether Cambridge School or other) do not all assume that their thinkers and texts are potential sources for first-order normative commitments on our part; in fact, it is hard to imagine a less engaged approach to the history of political thought, one which risks reducing political theory to "wisdom literature," as Shklar warned.

For good reasons, then, the comparative political theory project does not limit its self-justification as a subfield to the epistemic claim that non-Western texts or traditions will serve up first-order normative or explanatory arguments for us and that without them we are fighting with one hand tied behind our backs. Other reasons are given. Often, there is the vague sense that it is simply good or virtuous to know more about the

<sup>33</sup>See also Jenco, "What Does Heaven Ever Say?" These authors, in my opinion, go a step further than Euben as they are not satisfied merely to argue that non-Western authors are part of some conversation but are also not afraid to take sides in that conversation and show how it might be enhanced, resolved, or altered. That is, they go beyond the mere rehabilitative or appreciative function of political theory.

<sup>34</sup>To cite one example, a popular non-Western political and social thinker is the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century North African Ibn Khaldun, whose "Prolegomena" (*al-Muqaddima*) is often invoked for its sociological insights (e.g., Ernest Gellner, *Plough, Sword and Book: The Structure of Human History* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1988], 239). However, the case has been put forcefully by Aziz al-Azmeh that Western Orientalists profoundly misunderstood Ibn Khaldun by seeing him as a protosociologist whereas he is to be better understood as a sophisticated chronicler of North African tribal-dynastic states, and nothing else (al-Azmeh, *Ibn Khaldun: An Essay in Reinterpretation* [New York: Routledge, 1990]). Al-Azmeh, of course, may be wrong about this, or have gone too far in a desire to correct a dominant Orientalist reading (albeit one profoundly admiring of a non-Western thinker), but this debate shows that excessive zeal to demonstrate that we have something useful to learn from writers with a non-Western provenance may involve a (well-motivated) unscholarly, unrigorous misreading of the texts we are trying to save.

world and that studying non-Western traditions in particular is an act of recognition. This is almost certainly true, but is it a foundation for a subfield?

3. *If the interest in non-Western political thought is merely to decenter the canon or to frame cross-cultural dialogue, but without rigorous epistemic or normative standards, then it might be regarded as zoological, that is, a civic act rather than a theoretical or philosophical one.* This form of comparative political theory is not objectionable, but neither does it provide anything very exciting for the broader disciplines of political science and political theory. Certain studies fall into this category, such as Parel's attempt to draw parallels between "the Aristotelian *politikos* and the Confucian *junzi*, Indian dharma and the pre-modern Western notion of 'natural justice,' the Islamic prophet-legislator and the Platonic philosopher king."<sup>35</sup> But because they do not seek to evaluate either our concepts or theirs beyond the vague claim that "there may be many democracies/modernities/freedoms," they do not go much beyond the zoological. So what if, for example, classical Islam had an embryonic form of constitutionalism or consensual rule? Is the desire to show how a full-fledged one might be developed today or merely to deflect the crudest and most objectionable form of Western triumphalism?<sup>36</sup>

It thus appears that a comparative political theory grounded only in the desire for cross-cultural understanding, without either the claim that neglected voices contain first-order arguments or visions eligible for being adopted or the claim that comparative political theory is necessary for moral reconciliation, may be an honorable civic endeavor but is not likely to convince other political theorists of the need for a distinct discipline. What follows from this?

4. *Clearly, our engaged comparative interest in non-Western political thought arises largely out of a concern with (political) value-conflict.* While most would deny that comparative political theory is simply looking to attenuate value-conflict or find grounds for agreement or consensus between traditions, moral conflict is at the heart of almost all of their studies. After all, comparativists will be intuitively drawn to instances of difference or disagreement over some common object or question. And that fact of difference—the critique of liberal values, or Western imperialism, or pretensions to universalism—provides the justification for comparative political theory.

But the specific nature of the inquiry into value-conflict between "Western" and "non-Western" perspectives still needs to be clarified. Opposition to imperialism and hegemony is not enough. After all, one could oppose the Western imposition of its values and norms both through the hard power of war and sanctions and through the soft power of aid or human rights

<sup>35</sup>Parel, *Comparative Political Philosophy*, 12.

<sup>36</sup>E.g., Noah Feldman, *The Fall and Rise of the Islamic State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), but also some of the contributions to Khan, *Islamic Democratic Discourse*.

activism on all kinds of grounds.<sup>37</sup> One could adopt a principle of cultural and national sovereignty, or a belief (visible in the writings of such theorists as Hannah Arendt and Michael Walzer) that rights and the pursuit of the good life must be embedded in the concrete political life of specific communities. One could follow Carl Schmitt in denying that any single community can transcend politics and act and think for any other, noting how the most vicious, dehumanizing wars are those when a nation claims to be pursuing humanitarian aims. One could accept that many non-Western societies have unjust social and political practices but, without seeking to justify or explain or relativize them, assert that external coercion and forced social change are (almost) always the greater evils. One could accept in principle cross-cultural critique and even intervention, but point out that the egalitarian conditions for such intervention to be justified will never exist. In other words, one could defend the rights of non-Western communities to their own standards, their own politics, and their own histories without saying a single positive or negative thing about those standards, politics, and histories. In fact, we should notice the dangerous paradox in opposing Western imperialism via a substantive defense or contextualization of some controversial practice (e.g., sati/suttee, clitoridectomy, Islamic criminal law). Should the substantive defense or contextualization fail, is the implication that Western imperialism might thus be somehow more justified, if only in its intellectual form, if only in this one case?

This paradox reveals a crucial dilemma for comparative political theory. It wants to be relevant, which it achieves by directing itself to important normative disputes. But when the task is bringing to light poorly understood moral perspectives on normative disputes that oppose dominant Western views (such as Islamic fundamentalist or East Asian communitarian discourses), comparative political theory is often not quite sure what to say. Rarely are the most radical normative counterclaims endorsed outright, which would be the most obvious way of taking a first-order interest in them. Nor is the purpose to argue against them, which would be another way of making good on the claim that political theorists ought to look beyond their normal reading lists and stop treating the West as the repository of all knowledge. A basic premise of the comparative political theory project is that it does not seek to prejudge non-Western thought or impose Western judgments. Yet, after describing the contours of the differences between certain Western views and certain non-Western views and noting that one cannot assume the non-Western ones to be misguided, reactionary, or stagnant, comparative political theory often does not know where to go with its dialogue.

<sup>37</sup>See Naz K. Modirzadeh, "Taking Islamic Law Seriously: INGOs and the Battle for Muslim Hearts and Minds," *Harvard Human Rights Journal* 19 (2006): 191–233, for a critique of Western NGO human rights activism in the Islamic world.

The concern with moral disagreement and conflict in a globalized era beyond the limits of the Western nation-state makes political theory engaged; but what makes it comparative? I have argued that for it to be comparative the project must not be centered on the argument that neglected non-Western writers have something to teach us. Many certainly will, but then this is political philosophy or practical ethics proper. There must be some element of *distinction* in the inquiry that makes it comparative, something which I have shown to be problematic for comparative political theorists because often their point is that thinkers (and thus the non-Western contexts out of which they emerge) are “more like us than you think.”

What could this element be? What makes a text, thinker, or tradition “alien,” thus justifying treating an instance of moral disagreement as a problem for comparative political theory? It cannot just be the cultural or geographical background of the writer. Straussians have not read Farabi and Maimonides as part of a comparative Platonism or esotericism; they are part of their canon proper. Postcolonial theorists have insisted that the experience of colonized peoples is an essential part of the full history of the West. Deliberative and agonistic theories of discourse and democracy take the permanence of difference very seriously, but also assume that those differences are just as often grounded in interests as they are in distinct, autonomous modes of reasoning. Mere difference is not enough; there must be something that seals it off from us, so that it will remain alien to us no matter how long we engage with it—thus distinguishing political theory, perhaps, from reading foreign literature. I would like to submit that if engaged political theory is ever going to have a genuine and predominantly *comparative* element, which presumes a meaningful distinction between entities, then:

5. *Comparative political theory will likely have a special and predominant interest in religious doctrine and political thought.* It is clear how political thought emerging from within religious traditions accounts for the comparative aspect of comparative political theory. Not only is it clear how religious thought helps us set boundaries (however porous) between traditions of thought, it does so without leading to the problem (discussed above) of patronizing non-Western thinkers by treating them as important or interesting merely because of their cultural identity or because of the fact that they were once colonized by Europeans. Thus, whereas comparative political theory has a hard time explaining why certain great thinkers from outside the West whose thought is of direct interest to us (Kautilya, Ibn Khaldun, Gandhi, Tagore) give rise to a comparative political theory, less damage is done to thinkers whose greatness rests in their prestigious formulations of the doctrines of their religious traditions (Mawardi, Ghazali, Ibn Taymiyya, Qutb, for example, within Islam) by studying them as exemplars of a particular tradition of thought not meant to be “ours” even after deeper appreciation (short of conversion). Why a certain view or claim is “theirs” in an interesting and inoffensive way is thus much clearer in the case of religious thought than in secular thought emerging from a different cultural tradition.

I believe that a word of explanation is in order here. I do not mean to say that the concerns and thought of the other always remain unfamiliar and inscrutable. Of course the *alien* becomes less and less alien through encounters of various kinds. A non-Muslim scholar of Islamic law or political thought, for example, will become increasingly familiar with that world and comfortable in it. Of course, that scholar can *sympathize* with a Muslim who approaches the political world from the standpoint of Islamic thought, which in time will all become very familiar to that scholar. And, indeed, there will inevitably be many points of shared values and moral commitments across these boundaries. But no matter how *familiar* with Islamic thought, or how sympathetic to the other's goal of living in the world according to a conception of truth, or how many shared values and moral commitments, the full landscape of rich Islamic reasoning will never fully become his short of conversion. The proofs of Islamic moral reasoning will never become his, the way feminist logic can, Marxism can, perhaps even Gandhi's thought can. Expert, technical, internal moral reasoning from Islamic law to this or that substantive position is not always part of common moral dialogue with non-Muslims, and is usually not meant to be. But then an important corollary follows: when Muslims (to remain with my example here) are *not* arguing from Islamic law, but rather invoking general principles of dignity, civility, respect, and so on in the context of public political dialogue with Muslims and non-Muslims alike, then perhaps this is no longer really where comparative political theory is needed, precisely because it is no longer a matter of multiple *modes* of moral reasoning and justification. Just because we have persons and communities (dis)agreeing across religious identities and boundaries does not mean that we are actually dealing with a clash between different (say, secular and religious) modes of reasoning.

However, when applicable, religious doctrine best accounts for the comparative element in comparative political theory (although I am not insisting dogmatically that only religion can fit this bill). What, however, makes an alien religious text or tradition political theory or philosophy? Dallmayr gives an answer that leads to my sixth thesis: "One particularly distinctive aspect of comparative political theory needs to be noted: as a subfield of political theory, it concentrates not so much on governmental structures and empirical political processes (the concern of 'comparative politics') but rather on ideas, perspectives, and theoretical frameworks as they have been formulated in the past, and continue to be articulated today, in different parts of the world. In choosing this focus, comparative political theory places itself in large measure in the context of what modern political philosophy calls 'civil society,' a realm which forms a bridge between the strictly 'private' and strictly 'public' domains of life."<sup>38</sup> Thus:

6. *We must think that we are studying a semiautonomous application of reason (which includes the interpretation of revelation) in order to provide guidance*

<sup>38</sup>Dallmayr, *Comparative Political Theory: An Introduction*.

(including critique) on political and social life. The ideas themselves must be the object of our interest—even if it is only because we think they have social consequences. The reason for this imperative is grounded in the centrality of moral disagreement that I argued for in my fourth point. Taking moral disagreement seriously as a problem for political theory, however, must not succumb to the relativist fallacy of viewing all opposition to a moral claim as raising equally serious doubts about that claim's validity. While the simple fact of opposition to Western norms in non-Western contexts is often viewed as sufficient evidence for the particularity of those norms (and, thus, the imperialist or hegemonic nature of insisting on them, even on paper), it is clear that not all opposition is created equal in terms of raising normative doubt and thus warranting the attention of political theorists. (Again, sometimes we are merely opposing the hegemonic, imperialist *imposition* of norms without needing the local counternorms to be morally valid or compelling to us in a substantive way. We can argue against the forcible "democratization" of Iraq within American public or academic circles without needing to say the slightest positive thing about Saddam Hussein's mode of governance.)

Nor should philosophers, however, be too hasty in assuming that all opposition to a certain normative principle is merely anthropological in the sense of reflecting some local habit. While many apparently moral conflicts have complex underlying factors that dilute the utility of seeing them as conflicts between rival sets of value, of interest to political theory are the moral and symbolic dimensions of a conflict. I wish to submit here that what ought to be of interest to comparative political theory is the dispute between two fairly autonomous, more or less identifiable traditions of thought.

Traditions of thought are not identified just by their conflicting substantive value commitments (such as what characterizes conflicts between liberals, libertarians, Marxists, feminists, and conservatives), but by their mutually incompatible (possibly incomprehensible) *sources of authority*. An ideal-typical definition of two distinct traditions of thought would be that the adherents of one do not regard adherents of the other as part of a *common community of moral argumentation*. This is different from regarding the other as wrong (as liberals and Marxists might hold of one another on many matters); the condition I am describing is one where the moral other is not regarded as endorsing the same basic truth claims, system of proof (authority), or moral language such that she could be regarded as even within a broad common community of mutual justification.

Thus, significantly, an important feature of Gandhi's thought may be that he never regarded his non-Hindu interlocutors (the British, Muslim Indians, secular Indians) as unreachable in the terms of his argumentation or nonrational (even nonverbal) persuasion. Perhaps this is why Gandhi and other twentieth-century Indian thinkers are popular among Western political theorists. A feature of some Islamic opposition to Western values or practices may be that the terms of opposition are not exclusive, internal



Islamic ones. Opposition to Western imperialism or even incidents such as the Danish cartoon affair do not always take the form of expert, technical, internal Islamic reasoning. Confucian or “Asian” critiques of liberalism do not always rely on the appeal to the truth or authority of certain texts but on the general appeal of certain values, institutions, or traditions (as evidenced by the appeal Asian communitarianism often has for Western thinkers). In all of these cases, the challenge could be pressed that we are not dealing with comparative political theory at all. We are simply dealing with the diversity of human reasoning (and feeling) about nonetheless universal basic concerns, such as security, recognition, dignity, and communal membership, when multiple groups occupy the same political space.

Are we ever, in fact, separated from a fellow human by the divide I am describing as one between two utterly distinct systems of moral argumentation, or two utterly nonoverlapping Gadamerian horizons? I myself doubt very much that individuals think and act solely in terms of what their authoritative doctrine or ideology prescribes. Certainly, in the postcolonial world, finding non-Western thinkers who have been utterly unaffected (unpolluted?) by Western ideas, norms, and expectations is difficult. Certainly, the study of this postcolonial hybridity is an urgent and fascinating scholarly imperative.<sup>39</sup> What I am arguing, rather, is that if engaged comparative political theory relies for its coherence on the idea of distinct modes of political thought (the way that all comparative disciplines—politics, law, linguistics—have a way of distinguishing between entities), that divide is constructed in its purest, ideal-typical form by religious or other doctrinal truth claims. It may, of course, be that the distinction I am drawing is incoherent or unsustainable. But then so might the idea of an engaged comparative political theory if it is to be more than the study of non-Western political theory.

If it is the case that engaged comparative political theory is likely to have a special interest in principled value-conflict between more or less autonomous moral doctrines, I believe that the rigorous study of such value-conflict has at least three features:

the challenge of showing why moral disagreement is in the case in question challenging or troubling; the challenge of showing why it amounts to a case

<sup>39</sup>Euben’s book *Journeys to the Other Shore* and Anthony Parel’s essay, “Gandhi and the Emergence of the Modern Indian Political Canon” (*The Review of Politics* 70, no. 1 [2008]: 40–63) strike me as excellent examples. In the latter case, a good history of the evolution of Gandhi’s thought and the “emergence of the modern Indian political canon” will invariably involve the study of borrowing, dialogue, and hybridity. However, I would suggest that this makes Gandhi an excellent comparative political theorist. But what is comparative per se about the political theorist’s or intellectual historian’s exposition of this story? If this is comparative, then what good, nuanced cultural, social, or intellectual history wouldn’t be comparative political theory?

of comparative political theory; and the further challenge of showing how the moral conflict ought to be studied.

This last point is another vexing area for comparative political theory, in my opinion. What makes an alien theoretical text appropriate for study? What makes it the right text to study to illuminate the particular moral conflict in question? If we are primarily dealing with religion, and we are primarily interested in the underlying sources of value-conflict, this creates a certain set of standards for choosing texts and authors.

7. *The primary criterion for identifying texts and authors would seem to be their orthodoxy or centrality: they must either, for some reason, be authoritative themselves for adherents of that tradition, or they must represent a particularly good synthesis, elaboration, or statement of the value-conflict in question.* Given the inevitability that most forms of comparative political theory will justify themselves on the basis of the importance of the question being studied (which will tend to be its centrality as an instance of conflict, intellectual and/or political), the next choice to be justified is the thinker or text being studied. An inquisitive reader will want to know: Who is this writer (or what is this text) and where is he (it) situated within the context of that ethical tradition? Do the views encountered here represent a fairly representative, sophisticated, and challenging expression of the core conflict? If the text or thinker is invoked as evidence of the lack of profound conflict between civilizations or world-views, how central is it to the moral tradition in question?

Thus, while the complexity, ingenuity, and sophistication of thinkers and texts remain important criteria for comparative political theory, they may not be the central criteria. Ibn Khaldun, Averroës, and al-Farabi may be geniuses writing within Islamic civilization, but we do not read their masterpieces as orthodox expressions of Islamic commitments.<sup>40</sup> That “Farabi said so” is not an argument likely to move a pious Muslim believer. Al-Ghazali and Ibn Taymiyya, on the other hand, may represent the apex of medieval Islamic thought on par with Ibn Khaldun and al-Farabi in terms of sophistication but do so from within mainstream Islamic theology and jurisprudence.

<sup>40</sup> Although in the case of the latter two their works may contribute to a genuinely comparative scholarly study of how philosophers in monotheistic religions have sought to reconcile reason and revelation. Also, the crucial qualification must be made for when Averroës (Ibn Rushd) was writing in his capacity as a legal scholar. In that capacity he was largely bracketing his philosophical commitments and self-consciously contributing to a public discourse on Islamic normativity. Here, we may turn to him as a representative of mainstream Islamic commitments and, helpfully, his well-known legal manual has even been translated into English (Abu al-Walid Muhammad ibn Ahmad Ibn Rushd, *The Distinguished Jurist's Primer: A Translation of Bidayat al-mujtahid*, trans. Imran Ahsan Khan Nyazee [Reading, UK: The Centre for Muslim Contribution to Civilisation, 1994]).

They are not only geniuses, but geniuses that give a good indication of both the height of sophistication and also the center of gravity of Islamic doctrine.

However, I submit here that engaged comparative political theory will yield on complexity, ingenuity, and sophistication more quickly than it will yield on centrality and representativeness.<sup>41</sup> I believe that comparative political theorists must resist the temptation to oppose crude clash-of-civilizations thinking merely by pointing to notable, individual exceptions that are accessible and appealing to a Western audience. In the Islamic context, thinkers such as Abdolkarim Soroush, Abdullahi An-Na'im, Muhammad Talbi, and other reformers (or even thinkers from the medieval rationalist philosophical tradition, such as Averroës) are frequently invoked as evidence in opposition to the idea that Islam is somehow "incompatible" with democracy, human rights, rationalism, or gender equality. Of course, it is always possible to find brilliant and eloquent thinkers who rethink their traditions creatively in dialogue and dialectic with other traditions. However, when we use these authors merely to subvert hostile and dangerous caricatures, are we sure that we are actually addressing in the most rigorous and serious way the actual contours of deep moral disagreement between long-standing and enduring traditions? Texts must be selected carefully if they are going to be offered by comparative political theorists as helpful for understanding a value-conflict involving that moral tradition.<sup>42</sup>

If we are truly interested in comparing political theories—i.e., there must be a recognizable and stable boundary between systems of thought (it is not likely to fully become ours after deeper appreciation), and the other system of thought must be relatively theoretical and systematic—then what precisely is the object of comparison? Of course, any two things can be compared; however, rarely, I believe, will comparative political theory be evaluating the dispute between rival systems of thought or value at large (e.g., "Is Confucianism a valid alternative to Western philosophy?"). The centrality of moral conflict to comparative political theory means that comparison

<sup>41</sup>For example, the contemporary Egyptian-Qatari Islamic scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi is not regarded as a thinker of great personal genius. However, he is extraordinarily prolific and widely influential in contemporary Muslim Brotherhood circles. A *fatwa* or treatise by Qaradawi would be a good place to begin for a comparative political theorist seeking to study the present-day Islamist critique (and/or affirmation) of this or that non-Islamic value. Similar things could be said about the works of Sayyid Qutb or many standard premodern texts of Islamic law: they are known to represent part of the orthodox tradition of thought on ethical questions. A comparative political theorist would easily be able to account for why she is using such a text to give texture to a given moral disagreement.

<sup>42</sup>This raises the question of whether comparative political theory is always communitarian. Clearly, the arguments in this article lead to that conclusion. I would like to thank Russell Arben Fox for pressing this point.

will tend to coalesce around specific points of contact between moral traditions as they encounter one another in the world. Thus:

8. *Comparative political theory involves comparing responses to specific questions or problems of importance.* Presumably the questions examined within comparative political theory will also be of deep interest to us (the ethics of war, the rights of women, religious tolerance). That is, there must be some reason why it matters that moral disagreement persists.

I believe that ambitious comparative political theorists must resist the temptation to avoid the reality of radical disagreement, radical otherness, even when confronting it openly risks compromising the rehabilitative aim of comparative political theory. The myriad examples of where different cultural and religious traditions provide evidence of the multiplicity of good lives seem to me weak grounds for inaugurating a comparative political theory.<sup>43</sup> Comparative political theory does not need to be a purely apologetic practice vis-à-vis non-Western traditions designed to demonstrate to fellow Westerners that this or that non-Western tradition is more diverse and polyvalent than the crudest Western polemics give us to understand. Such discourses themselves tend to downplay the existence and seriousness of genuine moral disagreement and are ultimately no more sympathetic to non-Western moral traditions if they involve the selective reading out of unsavory positions. (Of course, in present political environments, it may be helpful and honorable to present such apologetic cases in public, but that is a short-term political act not a scholarly or philosophical one.)

The moral disagreements should not only be genuinely knotty questions, but also ones of common concern or ones that call into question a clear

<sup>43</sup>Although not self-described or advertised as a work of comparative political theory, Saba Mahmood's well-known book, *The Politics of Piety*, provides a handy example and cautionary tale. In an effort to correct hostile leftist and liberal-secular perceptions of the religious revival, especially among Muslim masses, Mahmood writes that "we can no longer arrogantly assume that secular forms of life and secularism's progressive formulations necessarily exhaust ways of living meaningfully and richly in this world" (Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005], xi–xii). It is hard to imagine Isaiah Berlin or John Rawls disagreeing with that. It seems to me that, the framing in terms of the inadequacy and harm of secular liberal conceptions of agency and autonomy notwithstanding, Mahmood is herself not really transgressing the boundaries of liberalism, insofar as she mostly vindicates veiling and public displays of piety, none of which seems to call into question genuinely core liberal commitments surrounding the harm principle and moral pluralism. Wouldn't a genuinely critical approach be willing to take on not only mildly other practices like veiling and habits of bodily self-discipline that make no claims on the freedom and autonomy of others, but also the most controversial practices that enjoy a full religious rationale? The countless studies on veiling strike me as revealing a desire to be seen as questioning liberalism or secularism but from an ideologically and morally safe space with one foot still within modern liberal sensibilities.

dominant position. That is, why does it matter for engaged political theory that certain received liberal conceptions of legitimacy, democracy, and rights are rejected outside the West? Perhaps the normatively correct position, even from within Western normative political philosophy, is *to have no position* on democracy in China, veiling in Egypt, or state-society relations in India.

Thus, comparative political theory derives its greatest sanction from the cases of principled value-conflicts that matter between more or less systematic and autonomous doctrinal systems. But then we are back to the problem discussed earlier in relation to exposing serious value-conflicts, that comparative political theory promises us a next step as part of its commitment to “opening the dialogue.” Thus:

9. *It is unlikely that as political theorists we will only be interested in exposing irreconcilable value-conflicts.* That may be the result of our inquiry—we may come to the judgment that there is simply no way for a tradition to affirm *x* and remain that tradition. Or we may be more worried morally about the political act of seeking the affirmation of *x* from within a non-Western moral system than about the failure to affirm *x*. Or we may simply wish to argue that the encounter with the new (the *thaumazein* that Dallmayr invokes) exposes unjustified assumptions and aporias about which we were unaware. Or we may seek to demonstrate how the encounter with the other is a precondition of our own action in the world. Or we may endorse a conception of critical political theory that sees as its mission a constant, ruthless questioning of stable judgments and exposing of aporias without offering stable justified claims itself.

But even in these cases, the possibility for consensus is on our mind, including persuading the Western audience that it is their present views that must give way.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, even if we were disposed towards the idea that value-conflicts are inevitable and irreconcilable (perhaps out of pessimism, Berlinian value pluralism, the view that all moral views are arbitrary sectarian doctrines or the view that consciousness is ever changing), we would need to understand clearly how irreconcilable value-conflicts matter for us, that is, why this is engaged political theory and not something else (intellectual history, area studies, sociology, journalism, security studies).

Existing articulations of comparative political theory are not doctrinally opposed to endorsing value claims or seeking consensus across traditions.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>44</sup>See Larry Krasnoff, “Consensus, Stability, and Normativity in Rawls’s Political Liberalism,” *Journal of Philosophy* 95, no. 6 (1998): 271–76, for the argument that all normative argumentation at some level aims at consensus. Thus, to the extent that it aims at persuasion, even a more radical form of deconstructionist critical theory shares this feature.

<sup>45</sup>Dallmayr insists that “there are cultural differences that, though understandable, may still be unacceptable. Nearly every culture contains features repugnant to a critical outside observer, even a sympathetic one. In non-Western societies, traditions such as untouchability, female infanticide, and female circumcision are typically viewed by

Furthermore, the phenomenon of principled value-conflict will always be at the heart of comparative political theory, and the study of value-conflict implies an interest in the conditions of reconciliation (one possibility being that we are the ones changing our minds). Thus:

10. *Exploring the normative implications for us of principled value-conflict is an appropriate task of engaged political theory and could be made the centerpiece of the comparative political theory project. Thus, comparative political theory may be conceived of as "justificatory" comparative political theory.* The strongest warrant for a comparative political theory is that there are normative contestations of proposals for values, norms, or terms of social cooperation that affect adherents of the doctrines and traditions that constitute those contestations. For comparative political theory to be as interesting and meaningful as possible, including to theorists not interested in the particular tradition in question, there must be the objective of examining thoroughly what first-order implication the normative dispute has.

Of course, there will be many objections to this notion. Let me consider the two most likely and most trenchant ones. First, it will be argued that only looking for conclusions will force us to read texts selectively or miss out on the richness of alien texts and traditions. (Maybe they have other interesting things to say besides those that bear on public justification or value-conflict. Or we must properly excavate the source of disagreement first. We need to be open to hearing what the other tradition has to say first, rather than rushing right in to look for consensus.) Second, it will be said that this is likely to impose arbitrarily liberal (or other Western) normative standards on other moral traditions.

The first objection is not incompatible with the justificatory comparative political theory I present here. Of course, there is no denying that non-Western traditions are rich and have other interesting things to say besides those which bear on justification or value-conflict. However, I have tried to argue in this article that there would be nothing particularly comparative about the study of non-Western traditions that focuses purely on the internal concerns of those traditions. There is no reason not to have a scholarship devoted to the noncomparative study of non-Western political thought (as, of course, we do).<sup>46</sup> This scholarship may, indeed, be richer and more sophisticated than various forms of comparative political theory.

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Westerners as particularly obnoxious and horrifying. And it seems to me that practices of this kind are indeed horrible and unacceptable" (Dallmayr, "Beyond Monologue," 254).

<sup>46</sup>From the Global Encounters book series, see Ramin Jahanbegloo, ed., *Iran: Between Tradition and Modernity* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004) and E. Fuat Keyman, ed., *Remaking Turkey: Globalization, Alternative Modernities, and Democracies* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007).

The other dimension of the first objection, the idea that comparative political theory should be justificatory in the sense of investigating the conditions for common moral principles to be affirmed from within various traditions, in no way suggests that the search for moral consensus is slipshod, hasty, or superficial. The purpose is not to mine or rummage through texts in search of quotations that might affirm this or that position. The fact of moral disagreement is taken very seriously. For many instances of moral disagreement there will be no consensus that allows the traditions in question to remain close to their core commitments. I am not suggesting that every single article or book must aim at definitive normative conclusions. Even within traditions, justification is often a matter of approaching a horizon rather than registering the last word. However, a patient, thorough, and responsible excavation of the contours of moral conflict itself is a creative and engaged way of genuinely comparing distinct ethical traditions. It has as a basic precondition a subtle and noninstrumental attitude toward alien traditions, which necessitates a complex understanding of them. The best justificatory comparative theorists will be experts in multiple traditions, not monolingual dilettantes with highlighters.

Note that justificatory comparative political theory inherently includes and subsumes all of what is valuable in the weaker form of comparative political theory, namely, the diagnostic element of examining the contours of disagreement between traditions and the appreciative element of demonstrating the diversity of other traditions. It only adds, namely, a concern with first-order argumentation and an engaged and creative use of multiple sources.

As to the second objection, a response can only be addressed to those who are interested in the prospects for arriving at moral judgments. Those who are skeptical of the idea of any justified moral-political norm (including their own) that is not an artifact of political power will a fortiori be skeptical of the idea of a justified moral-political norm in the context of a social encounter between nonequals. However, this position does not seem to represent the ethos of the comparative political theory project as presented by its main articulators. Theirs is a natural and legitimate concern with false universals, not the very idea of moral judgment.

The answer to this objection is that justificatory comparative political theory, like justificatory political theory proper, must be conducted with rigor. Rigor would, of course, be called for on both ends: arguing for reasonable conceptions of morality and justice free from the taint of imperialism and seeking plausible grounds for consensus in other traditions. The search for consensus in no way need be cover for an ideological hegemonic project. Perhaps the norms or beliefs that end up being justified are ones that oppose liberal or Western values, or their contemporary manifestations in structures of power and domination. A postcolonial argument that uses epistemically distinct, non-Western experiences, perspectives, or views to show Westerners that they ought to change their minds about their present

normative commitments or beliefs is what else if not a form of justificatory comparative political theory?<sup>47</sup>

### Conclusion

I argued above that five main purposes and motivations have been put forward for the project of comparative political theory: the *epistemic*, *global-democratic*, *critical-transformative*, *explanatory-interpretative*, and the *rehabilitative*. If my theses are more or less correct, it would seem that aspects of all of these purposes, suitably clarified and operationalized, would remain part of a justificatory comparative political theory. However, the greatest affinity is for the epistemic and global-democratic purposes.

There were two basic aspects of the epistemic claim: that our existing canon excludes voices from which we might learn and that universal claims cannot be formed on the basis of partial and arbitrarily exclusive perspectives. The first aspect I argued is part of political theory proper, not comparative political theory. The second aspect, however, is very much in the spirit of justificatory comparative political theory, as it aims at justifiable moral beliefs. Given that moral judgments are directed at specific social contexts of cooperation, it is certainly plausible that a moral judgment about a given context of cooperation will require consideration of all voices and views subject to and bearing on that context. Thus, if the moral judgment in question is about certain principles of global cooperation, global human rights schemes, or international just war theory, there is no warrant for arbitrarily excluding any voice from deliberation.

However, I should call attention to two strong forms of the epistemic claim that I think are incompatible with comparative political theory. One strong

<sup>47</sup>Indeed, I would rank as justificatory comparative political theory many studies and texts whose authors themselves might never use the term. From among the literature reviewed here, Ackerly's and Godrej's articles both seem to justify arguments in this way. I also have in mind some of the writings of anthropologist Talal Asad on secularism and Islam, in particular his recent "Reflections on Blasphemy and Social Criticism," in *Religion: Beyond a Concept*, ed. Hent de Vries (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 580–609, as well as those of his students, such as Saba Mahmood. More obviously, Sen's and Nussbaum's capabilities approach seems to invite something like this as well in its explicit recognition of the normative significance of culture (which might include normative doctrines) on assessing the priority of certain capabilities and the requirements of attaining them. Stephen Angle's *Human Rights in Chinese Thought: A Cross-Cultural Inquiry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) also displays the engaged, even justificatory, qualities I am arguing for in this paper insofar as it is not only concerned with presenting the features of Chinese thought that make it distinct and distinguished but also with the question of how non-Chinese Western philosophers should respond to contemporary Chinese claims about the uniqueness of their human rights concepts.



form would somehow suggest that moral judgment on a given question is achieved by splitting the difference or arriving at the lowest common denominator between all positions advanced from all perspectives. The mere fact that multiple views are expressed on a question is no epistemic reason for thinking that correct moral judgment in the end cannot involve opposing one or more of them. The very idea of moral judgment, of course, implies accepting some view(s) and rejecting others. Comparative political theory, I believe, must leave space for political theorists to critique and even reject some of the non-Western views and theories that we are trying to bring in without fear of necessarily reinforcing hegemony.

Another strong form of the epistemic claim would be a certain third-world perspectivism, which would hold, like the Marxist view of a special epistemic status for the proletariat or certain feminist claims for a special epistemic status for women, that non-Western critiques of a given Western norm or practice have a certain presumption of truth because they see it for what it is, stripped bare of its ideological dressing. There are two reasons for comparative political theorists not to endorse this assumption. The first is simply that any given critique or moral claim would have to be argued for in its own right; third world, non-Western, or even postcolonial is far too broad and diverse a category to justify the presumption that any and all critiques of hegemonic concepts are accurate. *Inter alia*, many of those critiques will be among themselves mutually contradictory. (Perhaps even more so than in debates within feminism which sometimes break down on grounds of class or race.)

However, a more important reason why a certain third-world perspectivism, even if true (and it certainly is insofar as we are discussing the critique of many institutions and practices), cannot be endorsed by comparative political theory is that it would be completely contradictory to comparative political theory's claim that distinct and diverse non-Western philosophical and theoretical traditions are what need to be brought in to political theory. In fact, the opposite might hold under such a form of perspectivism. That doctrine would hold that the view of the global system from the perspective of the world's dominated peoples is the epistemically clear and morally emancipatory one. But that view might very well be a universal one embodied in a form of subaltern reason. Far from calling for the inclusion of particular non-Western religious and philosophical traditions on epistemic grounds, it would have no necessary reason to see, for example, Islamic or Confucian views as embodying any true critique of neoliberal ideology. Those views might even be forms of subaltern false consciousness. Even if one could imagine a comparative interest in describing, defending, and celebrating countless particular antihegemonic formulations, this suggests to me an instrumental attitude toward the truth-claims and self-understandings of those traditions not in keeping with the spirit of comparative political theory.

For this reason, the conception of justificatory comparative political theory that I am proposing cannot a priori be assumed to be

critical-transformative in *all* instances. Of course, the practice of theorizing always holds the promise of revealing hidden assumptions and undoing harm. However, the reason why a critical-transformative benefit emerging from comparative political theory cannot be *promised* is that it cannot be assumed that existing hegemonic narratives, constraining categories and concepts, or false normative judgments are such that can be criticized, overturned, and transformed by the kinds of distinct doctrines and traditions that would make for an engaged comparative political theory. That is, if I am right in arguing that a genuinely comparative political theory (as opposed to a better political theory or a better universalism) must have a conception of what makes a tradition distinct from another (a role, I argue, that is best filled by religion), then we would need good reason to believe that existing normative errors or overextensions are necessarily corrected by other religious or theoretical doctrines, rather than a more open global discourse. For example, perhaps contemporary theories of state sovereignty, global resource distribution, and just war are classical exercises in neoliberal ideology. A more global political philosophy would reveal that. However, there is no reason to think that that more global political philosophy would be a *comparative* one in the sense of requiring Islamic, Confucian, Buddhist, or Baha'i views for its emancipatory-transformative quality. The arguments emerging from both Western and non-Western voices that would transform and emancipate us would thus have to be universal ones in some way, or else be critical local perspectives not necessarily emanating from any civilizational or religious intellectual tradition but from an immediate political context.

On my understanding, an explanatory-interpretative role remains for justificatory comparative political theory, but it is part of a larger ambition. Justificatory comparative political theory places moral conflict between discrete traditions of argumentation at the center of its reason for being. Therefore, elucidating and interpreting the dimensions and contours of a given moral disagreement from within multiple moral traditions is the first step for any exercise in comparative political theory. Thus, it has something to say to scholars interested in the political manifestations of moral conflict. Take, for example, the Danish cartoon controversy. A study that explored in depth the history of Islamic thought on the questions of visual representations of the Prophet, blasphemy, what makes a statement offensive, and what forms of political action to counter offense are justified in general and in the context of relations with non-Muslims in particular while utilizing concepts and categories intelligible to non-Muslims would be an ideal contribution under the banner of comparative political theory. My sole argument is that comparative political theory will be richer, bolder and more interesting by moving further into the realm of normative justification within multiple traditions.

Similarly, the rehabilitative aspect of comparative political theory is accomplished but is not viewed as enough to merit a new field and methodology. To take the same example, an in-depth study of Islamic views on blasphemy, slander, and political action in the context of the Danish cartoon affair would hopefully have the effect of portraying Islamic political thought as more

complex than media caricatures focusing on street riots. Similarly, it might be an act of recognition or appreciation to view Islamic thought as worthy of study, engagement and cross-cultural interpretation. However, justificatory comparative political theory need not stop there; it need not hide or blur its normative commitments and its commitment to moral dialogue. Furthermore, it rejects outright the notion of an apologetic-rehabilitative *duty*, grounded in the duty of recognition, of searching for an interpretation of *any* given moral conflict that, of necessity, casts *any* non-Western or subaltern actor or standpoint in a sympathetic light. Scholarship cannot set for itself this task and remain scholarship.

I suggested above that a certain aspect of the epistemic conception of the purpose of comparative political theory is shared by my proposal for a justificatory comparative political theory. As I understand it, this epistemic aspect is best characterized as congruent with the global-democratic motivation for (justificatory) comparative political theory. *The strongest warrant for a comparative political theory is that there are normative contestations of proposals for terms of social cooperation affecting adherents of the doctrines and traditions that constitute those contestations.* To the extent that there are normative proposals for terms of social cooperation both in domestic and global contexts that meet with principled objection from various and mutually incompatible moral traditions, political theory ought to concern itself with the contours of that contestation. Political theory about global or international questions (or normative claims that prescribe action affecting a global or international community) is democratic when it structures moral dialogue nonhierarchically.

So what is comparative political theory? I have argued that an engaged comparative political theory will be most coherent and most interesting with a focus on moral disagreement and justification across multiple distinct, semiautonomous traditions. Perhaps this conclusion will be unattractive to many people otherwise attracted to the idea of a comparative political theory. However, I believe that there is an element of immanent critique in my arguments. I believe the main impetus in existing calls for a “comparative political theory” to be of a moral, justificatory nature. However, this element in these works remains vague, implicit, and sometimes self-contradictory. Thus, exploring the present claims in the field for a comparative political theory leads one to ask what it would mean genuinely to compare political theories *qua* normative doctrines from an engaged standpoint. The ten theses I presented are partially an effort to tease out implicit assumptions involved once one goes down this route. As it turns out, it might not be so easy for any form of engaged political theory to follow political science, law, and other disciplines in adopting comparative methods. For unlike fields where the object of study is a well-contained entity (a single country, a single country’s legal system), political theory has a special burden. In dealing with the realm of thoughts, ideas, and truth-claims, it is not always clear when the boundary between “ours” and “theirs” obtains and when that boundary per se is generative of compelling questions.