

Beyond Monologue: For a Comparative Political Theory

By Fred Dallmayr

The essay advances a proposal that is addressed primarily to theorists, but with implications for the entire profession: the proposal to replace or supplement the rehearsal of routinized canons with a turn to global, cross-cultural (or “comparative”) political theorizing. I offer geopolitical and general intellectual reasons why the turn seems appropriate today, and I discuss a variety of theoretical or philosophical inspirations undergirding the turn. After highlighting some recent examples of comparative political theorizing, I conclude by responding to critical queries as well as indicating broader implications of the move “beyond monologue.”

More than four decades ago, Leo Strauss concluded one of his essays with the famous statement that political science “fiddles while Rome burns.”¹ The phrase was intended to stir the profession from the prevailing slumber of positivism and behavioralism, from the mindlessness induced by random data gathering. At the same time, and perhaps more specifically, Strauss meant the phrase to be a clarion call for fellow political theorists to recapture the Socratic élan of their enterprise: the task of unraveling the meaning and moral direction of political life. Many things have happened since Strauss penned his essay, but his words are still timely. In the wake of the events of September 11 and their global repercussions, his phrase has acquired even greater urgency, prompting us to ask whether political science—particularly political theory—is properly attentive to the “burning” issues of our time. Is it properly responsive to the Socratic challenge of critical political inquiry? In an effort to foster such responsiveness, this essay advances a proposal addressed chiefly to political theorists, but one that carries implications for the entire profession of political science: to replace or supplement the rehearsal of routinized canons with a turn to global, cross-cultural or “comparative” political theorizing. I first offer some reasons and motivations why such a turn seems appropriate today. Next, I discuss a variety of theoretical and philosophical inspirations that buttress the turn. Finally, I explore its broader political implications.

Before I proceed, let me briefly sketch my understanding of cross-cultural or comparative political theory, the contours of which will emerge more fully in subsequent discussions. By this term, I mean 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 and the emergence of what Marshall McLuhan called the “global village.” In contrast to hegemonic and imperialist modes of theorizing, the term implies that one segment of the world’s population cannot monopolize the language or idiom of the emerging “village,” or global civil society. Shared meanings and practices—to the extent that they are possible—can only arise from lateral interaction, negotiation, and contestation among different, historically grown cultural frameworks. This, in turn, means that the basic approach favored by comparative political theory is dialogical, or “hermeneutical”—that is, it relies on mutual interpretation.² Given this orientation, comparative theorists must necessarily be multilingual and well-trained in translation, although the vast terrain covered by cross-cultural comparison necessarily limits the range of linguistic competence of any one person.³ Theorists need to steer a middle course between narrow area specialists and abstract generalists: while the former slight the “theoretical,” the latter miss the “comparative” component of comparative political theory. Among prominent contemporary approaches, comparative theory clearly departs from what is commonly called “formal theory,” which imposes a general, universal “form” on diverse phenomena, thereby revealing its debt to the universalist claims of the European Enlightenment.

Some Contemporary Motivations

There are many reasons supporting the turn to comparative political theory. Ineluctably, one of them is September 11. At its annual meeting in the late summer of 2001, a leading professional organization featured a panel whose topic was “What Is Political Theory?” The panel attracted a large audience—and appropriately so. Among the panelists were leading American political theorists who offered thoughtful and well-informed reflections on many topics in the long history of political thought. Nevertheless, the panelists also revealed a deep-seated professional bias, what one may call an

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intellectual inhospitableness: by limiting themselves to familiar theories of the Western “canon” (from Plato to Rawls), they inadvertently illustrated what Samuel Huntington termed the West’s exclusion of, or predominance over, the rest.⁴ Barely ten days after the meeting, the terrorist attacks of September 11 took place, the consequences of which we are still trying to unravel today. Surely, America’s vulnerability was one of the dramatic revelations of that day. The fact that the country is inexorably part of the globalizing world necessarily has serious professional and theoretical, as well as political, consequences. Witnessing the juxtaposition of a Western-focused professional panel and a globally-induced attack, a senior political theorist like me was bound to recall Leo Strauss’s words of several decades ago regarding a certain “fiddling” of otherwise well-intentioned professionals.

To be sure, September 11 was only a particularly striking symptom within a host of complex global developments. Like a bolt of lightning, it illuminated the contours of a rapidly changing and disturbing international landscape. At the same time as the United States was being attacked by terrorists, many parts of the world were suffering genocide and ethnic cleansing on a scale that belies facile assumptions of shared standards. The combination of episodes of this kind challenged the fragile fabric of international “order” that had prevailed since World War II. At the same time, the rapid expansion of global markets is eroding the traditional structure of nation-states around the world and creating new forms of global economic hierarchy and inequality.⁵ Partly as a result of these changed conditions, national independence, or “liberation,” movements have often been forced into retreat, eclipsed by the upsurge of multiple post- and neo-colonial modes of tutelage and subservience. Thoughtful observers of these changes are increasingly aware of the need to imagine and cultivate new cross-cultural or even inter-civilizational bonds and arrangements, this time grounded in the active engagement and participation of cultures and people “on the ground,” at the juncture of local and global concerns.⁶

The dramas of the age were bound to intrude into academia in due course. Although often shielded by ivory-tower conventions, many academic disciplines began to keep pace with the unfolding cross-cultural and globalizing scenario. Anthropology was the leading discipline in this respect; since its founding, the field has been committed to far-flung ethnological and ethnographic studies. Ever since Edward Tylor’s work on “primitive cultures” and Malinowski’s journey to the Trobriand Islands, hosts of cultural anthropologists have been eager to immerse themselves in the rich tapestry of cultural idioms and traditions around the globe. Leading scholars, including Clifford Geertz and Marshall Sahlins, articulated exemplary methodological guideposts for these studies, especially field interviews and “hermeneutical” understanding.⁷ Building on these precedents, other social scientists followed suit, sometimes adding a more political edge. Influenced by post-colonialism and increased global communications, such scholars launched new fields of academic inquiry, including culture studies and post-colonial studies, dedicated to examining the interconnection and contestation between Western and non-Western societies

in our time.⁸ Religious studies has for some time fostered broad cross-cultural perspectives, which sometimes yield a rich harvest of inter-religious comparisons.⁹

The combination of these academic and non-academic developments was bound to put pressure on political science, an enterprise initially launched as a strictly Western (or even American) discipline. The first upshot of such pressure was comparative politics, a subfield based on empirical analysis and largely wedded to Western conceptual models. Eventually, however, political theorists felt the same pressure and were hence compelled to reconsider canonical attachments.

Philosophical Sources of Inspiration

When turning to political theory, we should note a certain peculiarity. Although attentive to some of the motivations discussed so far, political theorists are ultimately persuaded only by properly theoretical arguments, chiefly those provided by contemporary philosophy. As it happens, twentieth century European and Anglo-American philosophy is replete with guideposts pointing to a more cross-cultural orientation, an opening of the West toward the rest. This philosophical sea-change included: the so-called linguistic turn (the turn from ego consciousness to language) associated with Ludwig Wittgenstein and a host of subsequent philosophers; phenomenology (the study of the meaning of phenomena) launched by Edmund Husserl; hermeneutics (interpretation theory); and facets of pragmatism and postmodern deconstruction (both aiming at the critique of traditional metaphysical premises). These different orientations share a dissatisfaction with modern Western egocentrism (stylized in Descartes’s *ego cogito*) and its corollary, Eurocentrism. Sometimes all these sea-changes converge in a single philosophical work, particularly in the case of Martin Heidegger. The very starting point of Heidegger’s philosophy—his formulation of human existence as being-in-the-world—places him at odds with Cartesian metaphysics by inserting the “thinking ego” immediately into a world context composed of societies, fellow beings, and nature. He explicitly described the method he adopted in *Being and Time* as a “hermeneutical phenomenology,” that is, as an interpretive study of human world-experience. Over the years, the trajectory of his thought reflected his growing concern with the wider context of the globalizing world, and with the role of language in cross-cultural understanding. After the Second World War, he collaborated with a Chinese scholar in the (uncompleted) translation of the *Tao Te Ching*. In subsequent decades, he became preoccupied with progressive Europeanization, that is, global standardization under the aegis of Western technology. In response, he urged a new “planetary thinking,” which, though nurtured by local cultural idioms, would transcend hostile parochialisms through dialogical engagement.¹⁰

Heidegger’s student and associate Hans-Georg Gadamer, probably the leading philosopher of dialogue in recent times, pursued and fleshed out his teacher’s philosophy. From the beginning, Gadamer has stressed hermeneutics: that is, the endeavor to gain understanding through an intensive dialogue,

or encounter, between reader and text, between self and other, between indigenous traditions and alien life-forms. Truth and insight, from this vantage point, cannot be garnered by a retreat into neutral spectatorship, or a “view from nowhere,” but only through concrete existential engagement. In such an engagement, familiar assumptions, or “prejudices,” are brought to bear and allowed to be tested against unfamiliar perspectives and practices in a shared search for meaning. Gadamer famously outlined this approach in *Truth and Method*, which presented interpretation no longer as an optional academic methodology but as a constitutive ingredient of human existence and human inquiry. He subsequently developed the more concrete cross-cultural and multicultural implications of this view in a number of writings, especially in a volume titled *The Legacy of Europe*, which sought to extricate Europe (or the West) from the straitjacket of Eurocentrism, presenting it instead as the symbol of multicultural diversity, ready for new learning experiences in an age of globalization.¹¹

Heidegger and Gadamer’s teachings have been well received and creatively re-interpreted by numerous thinkers in East Asia, India, and the Muslim world. Indian philosopher J. L. Mehta is a good example of this creative reception. Raised in India and initially trained at Banaras Hindu University, Mehta later spent considerable time in Europe and America, where he gained a thorough knowledge of Western philosophy and especially of Heidegger and Gadamer. He repeatedly acknowledged the significance of their thought not for passive imitation, but for creative renewal. As he once wrote: “For all non-Western civilizations, however decrepit or wounded, Heidegger’s thinking brings hope, at this moment of world history, by making them see that . . . they are now free to think for themselves, in their own fashion.”¹² For Mehta, as for his Western mentors, the task of contemporary philosophy, especially planetary philosophy, was neither to discard all indigenous traditions in favor of the supremacy of Western modernity, nor to become entrenched in traditional parochialisms and sequestered world-views. Nor was it a matter of forging a hasty fusion—or confusion—shortchanging reciprocal questioning. What is required, again in his words, is “no facile compromise or reconciliation, miscalled ‘synthesis,’” but rather “a relentless exposure to the tension between the scientific consciousness [of the West] and the legacy of the [cultural and religious] past.” Only in this way can we “learn to address the right questions to our religious tradition and be rewarded by answers truly adequate to our present situation.”¹³

Heideggerian impulses have not fostered a philosophical sea-change by themselves; they were fruitfully assisted by developments in language philosophy and French phenomenology and deconstruction. In the former domain, Wittgenstein’s later writings contextualized human reason and the subject of cognition (*cogito*) as functions of grammar and multiple “language games.” Russian linguist Mikhail Bakhtin devel-

oped the implications of this move still more resolutely; his idea of “heteroglossia” underscored the need for multi-lingual dialogues between (only partially translatable) idioms and cultural frameworks.¹⁴ In the French context, Jacques Derrida’s work pointed in a similar direction; his key notion of *différance* (radical self-difference), in particular, meant to unsettle rigidly self-contained identities or invariant meaning structures. Drawing out the political implications of this notion, Derrida’s *The Other Heading* urged a basic repositioning of Europe, or the West, in the world. Such a repositioning would replace its role as “capstone,” or headmaster, with a different “heading” more hospitable to cross-cultural learning.¹⁵ In recommending this change, the book sustained the legacy of Derrida’s older compatriot, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose reflections on language and culture we urgently need to remember today. Merleau-Ponty’s task had been to resist the lure of a privileged or hegemonic spectatorship and to engage instead in the labor of concrete “lateral” interactions. As he wrote in a text on modern social science, “How can we understand someone else without sacrificing him to our logic or it to him?”¹⁶ Preferring to assimilate reality quickly to our ideas, Western social science has tended to proceed “as if it could roam over the object of its investigations at will . . . [as] an absolute observer.” As an antidote to this approach, Merleau-Ponty proposed an alternative path to the universal: “no longer the overarching universal of a strictly objective method, but a sort of lateral universal which we acquire through ethnological experience and its incessant testing of the self through the other person and the other person through the self.”¹⁷

Combined, the initiatives described above paved the way for properly comparative, cross-cultural or inter-civilizational philosophy. J. L. Mehta understood and confronted the challenge of such a mode of philosophizing when he tried to compare Heidegger’s thought with the complex tradition of Indian Vedanta. In such an attempt, he realized, abstract metaphysical concepts and categories need to be put aside, or at least “sublated,” to achieve the goal of “setting free, bringing into view and articulating in contemporary ways of speaking . . . the matter of thinking which, in what has actually been realized in thought, still remains unsaid and so unthought in the tradition of the East.”¹⁸ Spanish-Indian scholar Raimundo Panikkar used parallel arguments. Panikkar’s instructive essay titled “What is Comparative Philosophy Comparing?” attacked the widespread tendency to include comparison in a hegemonic and supposedly universal metaphysics. Comparative studies, he noted, are thereby integrated into “the thrust toward universalization characteristic of Western culture,” its desire to exert control “by striving toward a global picture of the world.” A basic endeavor of

his essay was to debunk this pretense: “Comparative philosophy cannot accept a method that reduces all visions to the view of one single philosophy,” or meta-philosophy. As an

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alternative, Panikkar delineated what he termed a “dialogical,” or “imparative,” mode of philosophizing (imparative from the Latin *imparare*, meaning “to learn”). Such a mode, he observed, reflects the conviction “that we cannot escape taking a stand somewhere when we philosophize” and that such a limitation makes our theorizing “relative to similar enterprises undertaken from different angles.” Dialogical comparison thus does not pretend to possess “a fulcrum outside time and space and above any other philosophy,” but rather involves continuous border crossing and negotiation of boundaries. The proper method to be pursued in these border crossings, in Panikkar’s view, is a “diatopical hermeneutics”: that is, a mode of interpretation required when the difference to be negotiated is “the distance between two (or more) cultures which have independently developed in different spaces (*topoi*) their own forms of philosophizing and ways of reaching intelligibility.”¹⁹

Comparative Political Theory

Despite their political implications, philosophical guideposts of this kind have reached political scientists and theorists only after some delay. This delay may have something to do with the nature of academic political science, or at least with its mainstream self-image. In the view of many scholars, political science is about power and its exercise in a collective arena—and nothing else. Given this narrow focus, these scholars tend to be attracted and attached to what are called the corridors of power, which are chiefly located nowadays in the West. Even students of international politics, including global development, for the most part share this outlook. In light of this disciplinary orientation, it is not surprising that many of the pioneering efforts toward comparative political theory have been launched by scholars on or from the periphery of the corridors of power.

Canadian-Indian political theorist Anthony Parel is a good case in point. Having in his earlier years immersed himself in a thorough study of Western political thought (with a focus on Aristotle, Aquinas, and Machiavelli), Parel subsequently shifted his research toward comparative or cross-cultural inquiries, paying special attention to East Indian traditions. He soon validated this shift and cleared a path for others by co-editing the first book in this field, *Comparative Political Philosophy: Studies Under the Upas Tree* (1992). As he noted in the book’s introduction, scholarship in political theory has come almost exclusively to mean the study of modern Western political thought; it assumes that modern Western texts are “products of universal reason itself.” However, this assumption has become dubious. In fact, Parel found “mounting evidence” to suggest that Western claims of universality are “questioned by other cultures, or at least by significant representatives of these cultures,” all of which renders comparative political theorizing today “both opportune and intellectually satisfying.”²⁰ For Parel, comparative political philosophy meant an approach that takes seriously “the validity of cultural pluralism and philosophical pluralism,” but does not amount to an endorsement of relativism or radical incommensurability.²¹ Although acknowledging the distances between cultural frameworks, Parel believed comparison had to explore not only existing differences but

also possible overlaps or similarities—what, following Eric Voegelin, he termed “equivalences.” Thus, it was possible to discover fruitful resemblances by comparing, for instance, “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.”²² Paying heed both to equivalences and differences was bound to enrich scholarship, by enabling one to both “deepen one’s understanding of one’s own tradition and engender understanding and respect for the traditions of others.”²³

Korean-American political theorist Hwa Yol Jung undertook a parallel foray beyond mainstream canons at roughly the same time. Relying on Continental philosophy and on the work of historian Hayden White, Jung introduced the notion of a “differential,” or “diatactical,” mode of theorizing (where diatactics means a concrete-experiential form of encounter). As he wrote in 1989, modern Western thinking has tended to be monological and “logocentric” (centered on the *cogito*), thereby allowing detached and “disembodied reason” to generate the danger of ethnocentrism and Eurocentrism. To counteract these specters, diatactics champions a “new, lateral way of interpreting culture, especially an alien culture, based on the principle of *difference* in the Heideggerian sense (i.e., heterology).” More recently, Jung has spelled out the implications of this approach in a volume titled *Comparative Political Culture in the Age of Globalization*. The basic aim of the volume is again to “decenter,” or call into question, the canonization of the modern West, its “narcissistic or hegemonic” self-image that privileges Europe or the West as the “cultural, scientific, religious and moral mecca and capital of the world.” Casting his cultural net very wide—from the Latin American thinker Enrique Dussel to the Vietnamese Thich Nhat Hanh—Jung now links comparative study with “relational ontology,” or a conception of “interbeing,” according to which everything must “inter-be,” that is, be “inter-connected to everything else” in the world. Employing such terms as “transtopia” and “transversality,” he credits comparative theory with overcoming the twin dangers of “ethnocentric chauvinism” and “faceless universalism,” as well as the dead-ends of Orientalism and Occidentalism.²⁴

Another major impulse promoting “transversal” studies comes from the Canadian political theorist Charles Taylor. Deeply rooted in the Hegelian tradition, creatively reinterpreted, as well as in recent philosophical hermeneutics, Taylor’s work has given a powerful boost to cross-cultural, or “multicultural,” studies highlighting dialogical encounter and recognition. As he wrote in a famous study on that topic: a crucial feature of human life is “its fundamentally *dialogical* character,” manifested in the fact that “we define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us.” Without shortchanging the modern ideas of individual freedom and equality, Taylor prefers to supplement the liberal “politics of equal dignity” with a sturdy “politics of difference” that, in lieu of an abstract “difference blindness,” seeks to “maintain and cherish distinctness”; that is, the “potential for forming and defining one’s own identity, as an individual and as a culture.” Multiculturalism from his

perspective does not imply an “anything goes” relativism or a “melting pot” confusion, but rather an open-minded learning process across boundaries. It is “an admission that we are very far away from that ultimate horizon from which the relative worth of different cultures might be evident.”²⁵ Relying on these premises, Taylor has engaged in comparative inquiries on many levels. He focuses not only on relations between Anglophone and Francophone political cultures in his native Canada, but also on broader East-West comparisons such as, the different use of the “language of rights” between Western liberals and Asian Buddhists. As he wrote in the latter case, proper cross-cultural comparison arises not from an exodus from the past but from a willingness to engage in mutual learning. “Contrary to what many people think, world convergence will not come through a loss or denial of traditions all around, but rather by creative reimmersions of different groups, each in their own spiritual heritage, traveling different routes to this goal.”²⁶

British-Indian political theorist Bhikhu Parekh has made one of the most significant contributions to the field of multiculturalism. Like Anthony Parel, Parekh devoted his early career to a sustained immersion in Western political thought, giving particular attention to the works of Jeremy Bentham, Michael Oakeshott, and Hannah Arendt. Also like Parel, he then broadened his horizons, shifting his focus to the legacy of Gandhi and to issues of post-colonialism and multiculturalism. His *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory* is a path-breaking text in this field. In addition to discussions of such topics as the meaning of culture, the relationship between pluralism and universalism, and the appropriate structure of a multicultural society, the book offers valuable observations on comparative political theorizing along dialogical and hermeneutical lines. Such theorizing, he states, must recognize the interplay of three factors: “the cultural embeddedness of human beings, the inescapability and desirability of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue, and the internal plurality of each culture.” Together with Panikkar and Gadamer, Parekh remonstrates against adopting a privileged “view from nowhere” that distances and neutralizes all cultural differences: “The common good and the collective will that are vital to any political society are generated not by transcending cultural and other particularities, but through their interplay in the cut and thrust of a dialogue.”²⁷

The preceding survey of political theorists cannot and does not claim to be exhaustive; given the vast scope of cross-cultural analysis, every account is by necessity selective. Yet my presentation would be seriously remiss if I did not refer at least briefly to some other significant contributions. Among an older generation of theorists, two prominent thinkers must surely be mentioned, Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin. I note the former because of his attentiveness to the great Muslim philosopher al-Farabi, and the latter because of his notion of “equivalences” and his study of the “ecumenic age.”²⁸ Partly following Strauss’s lead, Charles Butterworth has focused primarily on Islamic political philosophy of the classical age; his writings on al-Farabi and Ibn Rushd have established standards of scholarly excellence in this field. Butterworth’s example has in turn inspired a

number of younger theorists dedicated to exploring the connection between modern and contemporary Islam and Western democratic theory.²⁹ As with academic philosophy in general, today’s Western political theory can find resonance and responsiveness in virtually all non-Western contexts. Thus, to take the example of Islam again, Moroccan Mohammad al-Jabri, Iranian Abdolkarim Soroush, and many others have made important contributions to comparative political theory.³⁰ In the case of India, comparative theorists have valuable dialogue partners in such thinkers as Rajni Kothari, Ashis Nandy, Rajeev Bhargava, and Thomas Pantham.³¹ In East Asia, a lively discussion is underway among such theorists as Daniel Bell, Hahm Chaibong, and numerous others. I could make similar comments about Africa and Latin America as well.³²

Critical Queries and Broader Implications

As a result of the initiatives sketched so far, comparative political theory has steadily gained momentum, emerging as a viable field in the discipline of political science. Several outlets for publication are now available, making the enterprise attractive to younger scholars in particular.³³ Before turning to the broader implications of these developments, however, we should first consider critical queries. One raises the vexed issue of universalism, to which I have alluded repeatedly. Critics of comparative or cross-cultural study often accuse it of favoring parochial “identity politics,” thus betraying the idea of universalism and the aspirations to universality inherent in modernity. The charge is unfounded, or at least misdirected. To be sure, comparative study is attentive to diverse traditions or life-forms, and so valorizes difference and “otherness,” including what Charles Taylor calls a “politics of difference.” But this is a far cry from parochialism. In fact, one could argue that cross-cultural comparative theorists are genuine, even better, universalists, based on a simple question: *Who* is universal, or *whose* conception of universalism is really universal? Those who claim to be universal monopolize universalism; by this very claim, they necessarily exclude all others from their monopoly, and thereby undermine the very idea of universalism. Shunning monopolistic or monological gestures, all we can plausibly and honestly do is seek universality in our different ways. To do this, however, we surely need to take others and their aspirations seriously, which requires dialogue and empathetic attentiveness.

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. Universal feminism is a case in point. Clearly, the idea makes no sense unless we believe that women make a difference and that we need to listen to women in order to aspire properly to universality. But women make a difference in different ways. As the great feminist congress in Beijing demonstrated, universal feminism cannot be monopolized by Western (especially American) women. Western women, it became clear, need to listen to Asian women, African women, Muslim women, et cetera; that is, they have to take otherness seriously and hence cannot

pretend to speak for all others universally. This is ultimately a deep defense and justification of global democracy: no one can speak universally for everybody. It is also a defense of deliberative democracy, and especially of what Iris Marion Young has called communicative democracy, where communication makes room for the rich diversity of idioms.³⁴

This leads to another critical query: is cross-cultural communication entirely benign? Are there not appropriate limits to understanding, especially to the desire and willingness to understand? The answer to the latter is surely yes. Every effort at understanding encounters limits or dimensions of difference that need to be respected. Moreover, 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 Westerners as particularly obnoxious and horrifying. And it seems to me that practices of this kind are indeed horrible and unacceptable. Here, however, we should note several points. First of all, horror is not a monopoly of the East, but is also abundant in Western, so-called Judaeo-Christian, civilization—for example, the Crusades, the Inquisition, two world wars, the Holocaust, and Hiroshima—but that fact should hardly lead to a wholesale rejection of any civilization. Next, dialogue as described above is not necessarily harmonious or consensual but includes challenge and critical contestation. Thus, faced with appalling features of a culture, comparativists are not condemned to silence or mere understanding. The central issue here is whether critique proceeds from a presumed self-righteousness or hegemonic arrogance, or else from a shared engagement and a willingness to engage in a *mutually* transforming learning process. Basically, I agree on this point with Taylor's argument that different cultures have a presumptive worth in their favor, which can be outweighed by inhumane practices, and with Amy Gutmann's distinction between mere tolerance and genuine respect.³⁵

Let us turn now to broader implications and benefits. 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.

To the extent that Western modernity today is the dominant standard, comparative theorizing in many ways re-opens the old battle between the ancients and the moderns, a battle which curiously intersects with the difference between East and West. At issue here is not a nostalgic return to a pristine past, but a willingness to engage in cross-temporal and cross-cultural interrogation. As Parel remarks, being focused on the presence of the present, modernity has “subverted the classical and medieval traditions” in the West, while attempting to “subvert the political philosophies of other cultures as well.” Merleau-Ponty seconded this observation, writing in reference to fashionable evolutionary models that celebrated Western supe-

riority or maturity: “The Orient’s ‘childishness’ has something to teach us, if it were nothing more than the narrowness of our adult ideas.”³⁶

Comparative theory has ramifications beyond narrowly academic confines because it sustains a discerning *political* outlook—what Parekh calls a “radically critical perspective” on society. In our time, political liberalism has achieved virtually canonical status, edging out of the way nearly all competing ideologies or perspectives; moreover, under the auspices of market neo-liberalism, its canonization has become globalized. My point here is not to disparage liberalism’s original intent, or its “critical and emancipatory thrust,” in Parekh’s words, as a liberating agent that frees people from unquestioned dogmas and oppressive political structures.³⁷ However, something happens when an initial inspiration is transformed into an established creed or doctrine. At this point, instead of preserving its *élan*, liberalism’s original critique or mode of critical questioning is in danger of turning into a fixed answer or unquestioned dogma itself. To put it another way, liberty is changing from a liberating promise into a vested status or privileged possession. Only the rekindling of questioning—along temporal and cross-cultural lines—can provide an antidote to this danger of congealment.³⁸

In terms of long-range political vision, comparative political theorizing supports global democratic cooperation over oligarchic or imperial control and dialogical interaction over hegemonic unilateralism and monologue. The dangers of the latter are evident both in academic studies and in global politics. In the academic domain, Charles Taylor long ago exposed the consequences of unilateral ethnocentrism: the tendency to interpret “all other societies in the categories of our own” and ultimately to erect the “Atlantic-type polity” at the zenith of politics.³⁹ In the political arena, we should still remember Albert Camus’s warning that “dialogue on the level of mankind is less costly than the gospel preached by totalitarian [and other hegemonic] regimes in the form of a monologue dictated from the top of a lonely mountain. On the stage as in reality, monologue precedes death.”⁴⁰ For his part, Hans-Georg Gadamer has pleaded in favor of a “politics of dialogue and *phronesis* (practical wisdom)” to create a “new world order of human solidarity.”⁴¹ Such politics, it seems to me, might yet salvage our earth from the ravages of genocidal mayhem and the threat of nuclear disaster. In supporting such a vision of politics, political science as a discipline might escape the lure of fiddling while Rome burns and become instead a valuable participant in the effort to build a just global peace.

Notes

- 1 Strauss 1962, 327.
- 2 Dallmayr 2002a and Dallmayr 2002b.
- 3 In my view, comparative theorists should be very familiar with at least one major non-European language. Such familiarity will increase their sensitivity to the intricacies of language and to the problems of translation (without obviating, of course, the need for and the benefits of translation itself).

- 4 Huntington 1993, especially at 39–41.
 5 Dallmayr 2002c; Falk 1999.
 6 See, for example, Galtung 1980; Boulding 1988; Dallmayr 1998.
 7 Geertz 1973; Sahlins 1978; Clifford and Marcus 1986.
 8 See, for example, Schiller 1989; Benjamin et al. 2002; López 2001; Ashcroft et al. 1998; Spivak 1990.
 9 Smith 1991; Coward 1989; Dumoulin 1974; Smart 1993; Bakar and Nai 1997.
 10 Heidegger 1996, 30–4; Heidegger 1958, 106–7; Heidegger 1971; Hsiao 1987.
 11 Gadamer 1989a and Gadamer 1989b.
 12 Mehta 1990, 31.
 13 Mehta 1985, 124.
 14 Bakhtin 1981.
 15 Derrida 1982 and Derrida 1992.
 16 Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 115.
 17 Ibid., 120.
 18 Mehta 1987, 28–9.
 19 Panikkar 1988, 116–8, 125–30, 132–4.
 20 Parel 1992, 11.
 21 Ibid., 14.
 22 Ibid., 12.
 23 Ibid.
 24 Jung 1989, 14, 48–9; Jung 2002, 2, 8, 13–4.
 25 Taylor 1992, 32–3, 40–2, 73. See also Taylor 1985.
 26 Taylor 1999, 143–4.
 27 Parekh 2000, 338–40.
 28 See especially Mahdi 1963; Voegelin 1974; Voegelin 1981.
 29 Butterworth 2001; Butterworth 1986. Among younger scholars in this field see especially Euben 1999.
 30 See especially al-Jabri 1999; Soroush 2000; Sachedina 2001. On Soroush see also Dallmayr 2002d.
 31 See, for example, Kothari 1988; Kothari 1989; Nandy 1983; Nandy 1987; Bhargava 1998; and Pantham 1995.
 32 See, for example, Bell and Hahm 2003. Compare also Dussel 1995; Hountondji 2002; Eze 1997.
 33 See especially the series of books entitled *Global Encounters: Studies in Comparative Political Theory*, which I edit for Lexington Books. Starting with Dallmayr 1999, the series brings together scholars and intellectuals from around the globe in a kind of global public discourse.
 34 Young 2000. Compare also Seyla Benhabib's plea for "the creation and expansion of deliberative discursive multicultural spaces in liberal democracies" (Benhabib 2002, 101).
 35 Gutmann 1992; Taylor 1992.
 36 Parel 1992, 13–4; Merleau-Ponty 1964b, 139.
 37 Parekh 2000, 339–40.
 38 In this context, one can also not forget the frequent complicity of "liberal" regimes in illiberal oppression: chiefly, complicity in colonial and imperialist ventures predicated on "the white man's burden" and "la mission civilisatrice."
 39 Taylor 1971, 34.

- 40 Camus 1956, 284.
 41 Pantham 1992, 133.

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