

Twenty-first century political theory: Methods and Problems

Brooke Ackerly, July 31, 2012, post conference revised essay

Abstract

In the 21st century, political theorists trained in continental and analytical traditions in western thought should not be parochial. Political theorists are trying to avoid parochialism by wrestling with questions of global relevance or using methods that engage with texts and ideas that have been marginalized in the canon of western political thought. These two approaches to intellectual isolationism might seem incompatible because the first is question-driven and the second is methodology-driven. In fact both globalizing the questions of political theory and globalizing the theoretical traditions that inform political theory are important directions for 21st century political theory, and they ought to be pursued simultaneously and in collaboration.

Key words

Global Political Theory, Comparative Political Theory, Climate Change

Introduction

It is often said that environmental change in general and climate change in particular cause migration.¹ By some often repeated measure, 5.5 to 30 million people will be displaced from the Ganges-Brahmaputra river delta by climate change.² Induced by greenhouse gas emissions that have accumulated as a consequence of patterns of consumption and production in Europe, Australia, and North American since industrialization, climate change may displace 10-20% of the Bangladeshi population. This is a 21st century moral problem. Climate change is the kind of contemporary political problem that requires political theorists to think globally about questions related to how we should live together.

¹ Lonergan (1998) provides a good overview of the debate over whether there is evidence that environmental problems directly cause migration. The most comprehensive overview of the relationship between climate change and migration is the edited volume *Migration and Climate Change* (Pigué et al. 2011). See also Hugo (1996), McLeman and Smit (2006), and Warner et al. (2009).

² UNEP 2011 <http://www.grida.no/publications/vg/climate/page/3086.aspx>, Irene Dankelman et al., "Gender, Climate Change and Human Security," (Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP), 2008).

Not only substantively, but also methodologically, political theory at the dawn of the 21st century differs from political theory at the dawn of the 20th century and in fact from political theory throughout history.³ Many political theorists are now aware of the historical and contemporary parochialism and elitism of political theory. In the 21st century, due to the contributions to the field from post-colonial, feminist, and queer scholars, we would expect most political theorists to attempt to be self-aware regarding the parochialism and historical elitism of some political theory.

Political theorists are trying to avoid parochialism and elitism by wrestling with questions of global relevance and using methods that engage with texts and ideas that have been marginalized in the cannon of western political thought. These two approaches to intellectual isolationism might seem incompatible because the first is question-driven and the second is methodology-driven. In fact both globalizing the questions of political theory and globalizing the theoretical traditions that inform political theory are important directions for 21st century political theory and they need to be pursued simultaneously and in collaboration. In this article I argue that comparative political theory can be a resource in question-driven political theory and can develop a practice that is attentive to the potential elitism of academic theory.

Problem-based inquiry and comparative political thought

The claim that a rising sea-level will displace between 5.5 and 30 million Bangladeshis from the Ganges-Brahmaputra river delta is based on two commonly held back-of-the-envelope calculations – one about the land expected to “disappear” with sea-level rise and a second about the population. However, as the following discussion shows, much of what is relevant for political theory – particularly for the theoretical import of climate change – is not currently being discussed by those raising the alarm about climate refugees.

In 2012, at the dawn of the cyclone season, I was part of a field team studying the impacts of human-environment interactions on potential migration, political upheaval, and social stability.⁴ On May 26, I sat in a canal off a major river of the Ganges-Brahmaputra delta in the shelter of the Sunderbans forest of Bangladesh. From 5:45-5:50 a.m. with low tide at its lowest and the current hardly moving, a parade of boats -- each containing four men, all of the same size as if they had been produced by the same

³ On the purpose of political theory see Rajeev Bhargava, *What Is Political Theory and Why Do We Need It?*, Oxford Collected Essays. (Delhi ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Stephen K. White and J. Donald Moon, eds., *What Is Political Theory?* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2003).

⁴ The argument and the observations used to illustrate my argument are my own, but the analysis behind these is based on a large collaborative research project to which many have contributed data and related analysis. In the case of this paper, principle among these are Steve Goodbred, Jonathan Gilligan, Imtiaz Sheik, Mujibul Anam, Md. Arifur Rahman, Noorie Safa, Anika Binte Kasem, Selina Akhter, Aklima Akter, and Nazim Uddin. In addition, Matt DiLorenzo provided research assistance related to the international relations dimensions of the project.

person -- heads down the river on a 10-kilometer ride into the Sunderbans to catch fish for retail sale. At 5:56 the last straggler heads out. A few minutes later the same size boat comes in the same direction, this time only three people and bringing someone home from the hospital. As the current starts to move north with the tide coming in, two boats -- larger and full of men and women passengers -- head north with the current. Four hours later a boat full of water bottles heads north. Together these boat loads tell us more about how climate change affects the people of this river delta, their potential displacement, and the moral import of this displacement than the numbers (16 to 30 million) alone can. Further, *their* experience and reflection can contribute to normative inquiry by drawing our attention to the concepts that enable us to characterize their experience of the moral dimensions of climate change. What methods in political theory enable us to do that?

We can learn more about the import of climate change by watching traffic on a river than from the back of an envelope. The Khulna region of the Ganges-Brahmaputra river delta is a globally relevant locale for exploring the need for a global political theory and the role of comparative political thought in developing normative arguments about global problems. Southwestern Bangladesh (Khulna Division) is a site of enduring poverty, of anticipated global pressures due to climate change, of the global export market for shrimp, and of a cyclone (Sidr 2007) that was blamed in part for the global food crisis of 2008. During the decade of advancement toward the Millennium Development Goals, the southwest of Bangladesh did not see the same improvements that other regions of Bangladesh did. Although the region is already visible on the global stage, current estimates of the impact of climate change in southwest Bangladesh understate the problems. Policy makers have been misled by oversimplified data, which are not based on demographic analysis or qualitative ethnographic analysis.

In fact, the traffic on a river can tell us a lot about the potential impacts of climate change and about the questions we should be asking if we are concerned about it from a normative perspective. Each of the trips that I described in the introduction were part of the patterns of survival and struggle of a community that is known by three names: "little Kuwait," "hanging village," "the last village of Bangladesh." Each name provides insights into the factors that may contribute to migration, political upheaval, or social stability during the coming years as the human-environment dynamics change.

The boats of four men were headed out for a day or week of fishing in the Sunderbans, a protected national forest with regulated activity. That work might yield an income of 300 taka each per day. Why weren't they headed to the fishing spot for which the village gets the name "little Kuwait," that is, the spot where people migrate to fish because they can earn 200,000 taka per person for two months of work. That's nearly \$2500 in a country with under \$800 average annual income per capita. The regional political economy excludes certain local villagers from participating in the two months of economic revenue from "little Kuwait." Further, through this system is part

of the relations that influence the impact of the global political economy on local villagers.

The boats were likely made over the years by the carpenter boat builders whose community was severely affected by a recent cyclone. The interdependence of this boat builder community with the fishing communities around them enabled those whose homes were washed away by the storm to work for those whose source of livelihood (boats) were washed away by the same storm. Initially, invisible economic hierarchies and political nuances prevented the fishermen from being part of the rich-quick political economy. But their economic interdependence with the boat builders enabled both to survive the cyclone's significant livelihood impacts.

The two large boats were bringing day laborers on an hour-long boat ride up to an agricultural community across the channel to harvest watermelons. In the hanging village there are few opportunities for wage labor because, following a cyclone, the villagers sought the help of external investors to rebuild the embankment so that they didn't suffer the extended erosion that would be the consequence of waiting for the government to do the rebuilding. In exchange, they converted their land to shrimp farming. Shrimp farming employs only one tenth the labor as padi farming. As a consequence, the landless people of the village need to go elsewhere for agricultural day labor. Over the past few years, the people from that agricultural community converted their fields from shrimping to padi and watermelon. These agricultural enterprises necessitate that they hire outside laborers.

The location of health care and the role of inland waterways in enabling even the poorest villager to access that health care have global and local dimensions. Foreign and national funds generally subsidize these clinical resources. Global funding supports the government's maintenance of the channels and the integrity of the embankments, but in a crisis, people have to repair their own embankments quickly in a spirit of community cooperation, or the erosion risks washing the "hanging village" into the delta. Access to day labor associated with government and NGO projects has been a source of income smoothing throughout the last two years. It has also enabled women to provide subsistence rice for their families while their husbands migrate away for seasonal labor and to secure greater economic opportunities.

Finally, "the last village" in Bangladesh has no good drinking water and so boats must go to known sources to buy water and bring it to the village. They call drinkable water "misti" or "sweet" water as opposed to saline.⁵ The water table is saline and contains iron and in certain places dangerously high levels of arsenic. Rain water needs to be stored in ponds and filtered with pond sand filters, which need to be maintained.

⁵ Having tested all of the sources of drinking water in the last village in Bangladesh and its neighboring communities, we found no water suitable for drinking. Put this in when Laura et al have the data.

The boats of water bottles were headed north to a madrasa (religious school) with a misti water tube well. Some similar boats would go farther north to purchase water from a water treatment plant or would travel in a different direction to a forest station with filtered pond water.

Each of these boat rides illustrates that for livelihood, income, health, and water, this village depends on complex relations and processes of political, economic and social life that can be impacted by environmental conditions as well. The people in this village, like the 16 to 30 million expected to be affected by sea-level rise, are already affected by stressed environmental conditions. Their survival strategies may provide insights into the empirical question of how many people will be displaced by climate change.⁶

These people, their relations, and the processes that affect their life circumstances have normative lessons to offer as well. International pressures to maintain and preserve the Sunderbans forest combined with an historical economic pattern of patronage, a familiar practice of bribery and extortion, and growing political economy of piracy, put severe economic pressure on a population whose sources of basic livelihood – water, food and income – are already under significant stress. Internal demand for economic growth to alleviate poverty, combined with international lending schemes, create pressure to shift to sources of livelihood (shrimp farming, and unsustainable fishing) that generate income for the locals and wealth for the landowners in the short-term, but that have the long-term impact of decreasing livelihood security for the people in poverty who live in the region. For example, shrimp farming decreases the resources for fresh water irrigation for kitchen gardens and therefore makes families rely on markets for diversity and nutritional needs that previously were met through local biodiversity. The seasonality of certain forms of fishing and agriculture makes people depend on wage labor to even out their consumption throughout the year. Furthermore, financial stability and livelihood security are vulnerable to fluctuations in the price of rice which is determined by global markets and national policies far removed from local spheres of influence. What tools does normative political theory offer for deepening our understandings of the import of these observations for how we should live?

Preliminary analysis of the problems illustrated by the economic activity on a minor canal near small villages of only 500 to 3000 people indicates that local processes and relations of political, economic, and social life are elemental to understanding the normative impact of global climate change. In addition, these observations affirm the 21st century inclination to investigate the global dimensions of any local question about how we should live. They likewise affirm our inclination to inquire about the local

⁶ This topic is covered in other work on progress on human rights, human security, and climate change.

impacts of distant institutions (the World Bank in this case) that are designed to support the global political economy.

Familiar notions of justice and responsibility, and familiar ways of thinking about these are insufficient for thinking about the justice and injustice of the impact of climate change in this region.⁷ Consequently, it is less obvious what these observations suggest about how, *methodologically* political theorists should go about exploring these questions. In the next section I will explore the role for comparative political theorists in this enterprise, but first I situate this role in the context of debates and methods of political theorists more generally.

Political theory landscape and methods

How do we determine which intellectual traditions should inform contemporary reflections about matters of global relevance? How many should? Should we dialogue between or among such traditions? Do we need to study new languages in order to participate in such dialogues? Or do we need deep ethnographic and historical understanding of a particular conceptual terrain unknown (undiscovered) by one's home intellectual tradition in order to shed light on new problems. Or, does political theory require engagement with contemporary scholars who have training, experience, and imaginations developed in multiple traditions. Do we need to broaden our tool kit to include not only new languages, but also new ways of thinking about the historical epistemology of concepts? Some deep intuition tells us that the life experience of these people hanging on in their rural Bangladeshi villages is morally connected to ours. Understanding that connection is not just an empirical question. It is emphatically a moral and political question through which we can explore important dimensions of what we mean when we ask, "How should we live together?". Informed of the range of ways in which elitism might constrain an inquiry, the range of relevant *a priori* reflections quite broad.⁸

I will follow the disciplinary norm of expansive literature review to provide an account of and discipline for the existing literature on comparative approaches to political theory and follow that with a close examination of three particular recent examples which I assess on their own terms as well as against their appropriateness for a globally-engaged question-driven puzzle in political theory. But given the subject of

⁷ Other global injustices pose such difficult challenges as well (see Brooke Ackerly, "The Hardest Cases of Global Injustice: The Responsibility to Inquire," in *Justice, Sustainability, and Security: Global Ethics for the 21st Century*, ed. Eric Heinze (Georgetown: Georgetown University Press, forthcoming).

⁸ Clearly, the subject of this article could be vast and depend on a review of all traditions and all methods. It is also tempting to pursue a range of related questions. When working across traditions, is it sufficient to work within either an analytical or a critical approach? Can we do any political theory without feminism? If we do require feminism, from which intellectual or experiential context can we pick our feminisms? If a certain political and experiential context informs our feminism, what intellectual inquiries does that require us to explore?

this essay, I want the reader to meta-cognate on my argument. By this I mean more than wanting the reader to assess my way of categorizing the field and to assess how well I do that, as she typically would. In addition, I want her to think about why it feels like the appropriate response to the vastness of the field is to discipline it by sorting and categorizing the scholarship that has been done. We expect this norm because it helps us get on common ground with our colleagues. We establish this common ground by defining a realm and content for those familiar with the context and by bringing the uninitiated into the conversation by introducing them to the history of the conversation. The reader should meta-cognate on the fact that this way of establishing intellectual common ground does so by setting boundaries of inclusion and exclusion that develop their own power in the development of political theory. The better the literature review,⁹ the more inclined we are to be confident in its thoroughness and its typologies. However, I invite the reader to reflect about the power of that literature review norm to reinforce academic elitism. The ambition of writing an effective literature review is an act of hubris.

With a history dating back to Confucius and Aristotle, Political Theory stands apart as a field with a purpose long before the articulation of methods became essential to defining a discipline. Many have tried to discipline political theory by articulating its methods. However, those of us who work professionally within the political theory “discipline” wrestle with the boundaries we have created, often intentionally, but perhaps more often unintentionally through the limits of our training, world experience, and imaginations.

Consequently, in order to discuss methods in comparative political theory, we have to engage but not embrace two suspect premises: 1) that the field of comparative political theory is a discipline with distinct methods and 2) that delimiting those methods strengthen the field.

For those of us who teach, it is reasonable for us to engage in explaining our methods and their alternatives to our students. But, for the purposes of *doing* political theory, methods matter because the exposition of our methods is part of justifying our arguments.¹⁰ For some, the exposition of the method is itself a theoretical and normative argument.¹¹ However, ultimately any focus on methods must be assessed relative to a

⁹ For an excellent model see Roxanne Leslie Euben, *Journeys to the Other Shore: Muslim and Western Travelers in Search of Knowledge*, Princeton Studies in Muslim Politics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

¹⁰ Rainer Forst, "Towards a Critical Theory of Transnational Justice," *Metaphilosophy* 32, no. 1/2 (2001); Jürgen Habermas, *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics*, [Pbk. , 1994]. ed., Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994); Gerald F. Gaus, *Value and Justification: The Foundations of Liberal Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Don Herzog, *Without Foundations: Justification in Political Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

¹¹ Farah Godrej, "Towards a Cosmopolitan Political Thought: The Hermeneutics of Interpreting the Other," *Polity* 41, no. 2 (2009); Brooke A. Ackerly and Jacqui True, "Reflexivity in Practice: Power and Ethics in Feminist Research on International Relations," *International Studies Review* (2008); Leigh Kathryn Jenco, ""What Does Heaven Ever

normative question or theoretical method. For the purposes of doing political theory, questions matter.

One historical approach to political theory has been to read canonical texts. Augustine read Plato. Aquinas read Aristotle. Marx read Rousseau. All Confucian thinkers read the classic [*jing*] texts (though they debate which these are). There is variety among the canonical approaches. In the US the touchstone 20th century thinkers who provide accounts of these methods are Strauss and Skinner: the first reading canonical texts as deserving of their status because of the hidden truths within; the second reading these in the context of their political and intellectual history. For some, the relevant canonical texts come from distinct intellectual traditions around the world. For others, the engagement among traditions has been part of the intellectual and political history of both. The contemporary comparative political theorists in English exhibit this range as well.

Regardless of general methodology, contemporary elite political theorists must have humility. We must have humility in the face of “cultural difference;” that is, we are not confident that we are understanding the text in its historical tradition’s complexity (whether or not we may think of it as our own). We must have humility in the face of our own “expertise;” that is, as we engage in scholarship across traditions, we need to be modest about what small piece of our “home” tradition is actually an area of expertise. We must have humility about our methods; that is, being explicit about our methods is not a substitute for being an expert in many methods. Some trans-intellectual engagement might benefit from a multi-method approach – the dialogic approach, any approach that requires emersion in a non-natal language, any approach that requires expertise in political history, and any approach that requires methods for reading into elite texts the struggles and insights of non-elites, etc. Given the lifetime necessary to execute any one of these methods well, we need humility in the face of our own limitations.

Finally, but perhaps first, we need humility in the face of our blindness to our own blind spots. The scholarship of the last century has meant that even elite scholar-focused scholarship must be aware of its elitism. Not everyone is. However, scholarly elitism is not an acceptable excuse for being unaware of sexism, heteronormativity, particular-centrism, colonialism, imperialism, etc. And, of course, in the 21st century, the elites of the west do not have a monopoly on exclusionary elitism. Intellectual and political elites all over the world have demonstrated an ability to silence dissent, often with the suggestion that such dissent is “foreign.” While the impetus for “democracy” may not be universal in the sense that it exists everywhere and at all times, it may be that everywhere people are in struggle against oppression, they seek alternative forms

Say?" A Methods-Centered Approach to Cross-Cultural Engagement," *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 4 (2007).

of political organization that make their interests more important to political decision-makers.

Comparative political theory landscape of methods

Does the very *a priori* commitment to doing comparative political theory preclude selecting the methods most appropriate to a question? Perhaps counter intuitively, I am going to argue that we can be committed to using comparative methods even while also being committed to question-driven research. To anticipate, comparative political theory is so broad a category that a general methodological commitment to doing comparative political thought is a form of elite humility that leaves one open to a broad range of methodological approaches suitable to question-driven research.

The veracity of that claim depends on the methodological commitments of comparative political thought. Depending on the boundaries of the field, comparative political thought encompasses a broad range of methodologies. The methodologies that comparative political theorists use seem to be responsive to the political puzzles that interest their authors.

None of us turns to comparative work because we ran out of books to read in the intellectual traditions in which we were trained and began our careers. We turn to it because of some interest. Sometimes it is due to an interest in the mysteries of what the engagement might reveal. For others it is with a more guided purpose; for example the possibilities of illiberal democracy¹² or a more profound understanding of modernity.¹³ In the field of comparative political theory, there are those trained in western thought who have no training in the languages and political thought traditions outside of the west and who have been working outside of their comfort zone for intellectual and pedagogical reasons.¹⁴ There are others – often academics from non-western traditions – for whom academic training has always been cross-contextual.¹⁵ And there are others, who have trained in one tradition, but later develop research interests that require another tradition and extensive language training.¹⁶

¹² Azizah Y. al-Hibri, "Islamic Constitutionalism and the Concept of Democracy," in *Border Crossings: Toward a Comparative Political Theory*, ed. Fred R. Dallmayr (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1999); Joseph Chan, "An Alternative View," *Journal of Democracy* 8, no. 2 (1997); Albert Chen, "Is Confucianism Compatible with Liberal Constitutional Democracy," (2007).

¹³ Roxanne Leslie Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

¹⁴ Ackerly, Cohen, Williams, Drysek

¹⁵ For example, Sungmoon, Shin, Youngmin, Joseph Chan, "Is There a Confucian Perspective on Social Justice?," in *Western Political Thought in Dialogue with Asia*, ed. Takashi Shogimen and Cary J. Nederman (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009).

¹⁶ Dallmayr, Richard Kim

Some comparative political theorists retell the history of political thought in order to highlight the interconnections across traditions and over time as a way of dispelling the clash of civilizations account of theoretical history.¹⁷ Rajeev Bhargava steps behind this particular, historical purpose of political theory and argues that because all human experience is mediated by the “meaning and significance” that human’s give to the nouns and verbs (chosen to describe objects and actions), all human experience provides the building blocks of political theory.¹⁸ On this view, in order to do political theory, a theory needs to be built out of words whose meaning people have already come to understand in a particular context. Across particular contexts we could develop their shared meanings by coming to understand how one another’s experiences have affected contextualization of those concepts.

It is not surprising, then, that moral ethnography is a methodology to which some comparative political theorists have given attention. Farah Godrej’s method of comparative political theory requires the interpretation of life within a particular intellectual tradition by engaging in deep ethnographic and immanent participation in the contemporary life of that tradition in order to emerge from that experience able to theorize from the life experience of more than one tradition.¹⁹ Leigh Jenco instead encourages an ethnographic participation in the historical practice of the theory.²⁰ If theory is known through life experience as Bhargava, Godrej, and Jenco argue, then Jenco’s particular form of doing comparative political thought would never be possible as the life context in which the theory was written could not be recreated.

However, moral ethnography is not the only such proposal. Other approaches to comparative political theory, center the meaning of key concepts and seek to better understand these in each tradition while exploring whether these meanings are commensurable across the traditions.²¹ Others interrogate the value of a set of concepts from one tradition for theoretical puzzles in another tradition²² or explore the relevance of the institutions that developed in one conceptual context for another conceptual context.²³

¹⁷ Euben, *Journeys to the Other Shore: Muslim and Western Travelers in Search of Knowledge*; Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism*.

¹⁸ Bhargava, *What Is Political Theory and Why Do We Need It?*, 7 and the entire book.

¹⁹ Farah Godrej, *Cosmopolitan Political Thought: Method, Practice, Discipline* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

²⁰ Jenco, “What Does Heaven Ever Say?” A Methods-Centered Approach to Cross-Cultural Engagement.”

²¹ Yusuf K. Umar, “Farabi and Greek Political Philosophy,” in *Comparative Political Philosophy: Studies under the Upas Tree*, ed. Anthony Parel and Ronald C. Keith (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2003 [1992]); Zhang Longxi, “Heaven and Man: From a Cross-Cultural Perspective,” in *Comparative Political Theory and Cross-Cultural Philosophy: Essays in Honor of Hwa Yol Jung*, ed. Jin Y. Park and Hwa Yol Jung (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009).

²² Brooke A. Ackerly, “Is Liberalism the Only Way toward Democracy? Confucianism and Democracy,” *Political Theory* 33, no. 4 (2005). Chan, “An Alternative View.”

²³ Stephen C. Angle, “Decent Democratic Centralism,” *Political Theory* 33, no. 4 (2005).

Yet another approach, recognizes that while any particular place and time might be distant from many others, in fact, over the development of traditions of meaning, there have been internal contestations about meaning²⁴ and cross-tradition interaction²⁵ such that the notion of distinct traditions is drawn into question.

Versions of these various methodologies have been grouped together and characterized as a “dialogic model” of comparative political theory, by which is meant some form of dialogue between two traditions.²⁶ The loose similarity is useful in comparing a comparative method with a method that moves unreflectively within a single tradition in political theory, but this characterization is not helpful in analyzing whether comparative political theory provides a methodology that is appropriate to comparative political thought.

All of these approaches are approaches for the elite privileged global academic community.²⁷ Are any of them individually or all of them collectively able to be deployed in question-driven political theory and exercised with elite humility?

Comparative political theory and question-driven research

One might argue that comparative political theory cannot be question-driven because “comparative political theory” entails a prior commitment to working with a particular methodology. However, as we have seen, comparative political theory is a broad category including all of the methods discussed in the preceding section. One might be committed to doing comparative political theory as part of an exercise in elite humility and yet be open as to tradition, concepts, and methods within that as appropriate to a given problem.

In the earlier part of this article, I identified ways in which the local political, economic, and social relations and processes of small environmentally vulnerable villages were subject to global influences that had yet to be fully understood empirically

²⁴ Ackerly, "Is Liberalism the Only Way toward Democracy? Confucianism and Democracy."; Michaëlle Browers, *Democracy and Civil Society in Arab Political Thought: Transcultural Possibilities*, 1st ed., Modern Intellectual and Political History of the Middle East (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2006).

²⁵ Bruce Buchan, "Asia and the Moral Geography of European Enlightenment Political Thought C. 1600-1800," in *Western Political Thought in Dialogue with Asia*, ed. Takashi Shogimen and Cary J. Nederman (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009).

²⁶ Fred Dallmayr, "Beyond Monologue: For a Comparative Political Theory," *Perspectives on Politics* 2, no. 2 (2004); Jenco, "What Does Heaven Ever Say?" A Methods-Centered Approach to Cross-Cultural Engagement."; Godrej, *Cosmopolitan Political Thought: Method, Practice, Discipline*.

²⁷ In Bengal, two theorists – Roya and the guy – a century apart have pioneered a method of political theory that is based on immanent critique of practices. Roya criticizes gender practices and the guy criticizes the role of science in political decision making. I mention these because they show that it is possible to non-elite scholarship on globally relevant topics from sites of disadvantage. But to discuss these further would be an aside because neither is method-driven generally or comparative in particular.

and normatively. For the study of the normative import of these global and local connections, comparative political theory methods may be useful and need to be assessed against that research goal. In this section, I will discuss three methodological proposals which are explicitly not question-driven in their exposition and evaluate how as described or slightly modified they might be useful for question-driven comparative political theory.

Towards a parochial political thought

For Leigh Jenco, part of the interest in doing comparative political theory is in doing it well.²⁸ In her critical engagement with other comparative scholars, she does not criticize their readings of a given theorist or tradition, but rather their methods for doing so. For Jenco, the methods are both substance and process of inquiry.

Jenco authors a form of neo-Straussianism with a heavy dose of Cambridge school historical and intellectual contextualization.²⁹ On this view there are timeless truths in canonical texts and we need to be open to conversion to them. The ideas of their authors can be known outside of their context, but to understand their methods, they need to be read in historical context. I think that this aspect of Jenco's method is an important contribution to the field.

Jenco reviews the methods of two thinkers associated with Confucian thought – Wang Yangming and Kang Youwei. Both of these theorists engage in a form of textual fundamentalism each with progressive purposes relative to the dominant trend in the Confucian thought of his time. During the Ming dynasty, Wang reinterprets Confucian teaching as calling for a self-cultivation of mind and thought through action in a way that renders Wang's engagement with Buddhist influences evident. Kang joins a classical debate about the old and new Classics and their authorship in way that supports the political legitimacy of reform during the Qing dynasty. Jenco's 2007 essay celebrates the fundamentalisms of these authors as "the analytic frames developed by" their traditions.³⁰ Further, she adds that to understand the substance of the claims being made, one needs to practice the self-cultivation encouraged by these authors (particularly Wang). In sum, both theorists do a form of immanent critique of their time and context, advocate self-cultivation, and promote "progressive" ends.

There are a lot of claims here and it is important to distinguish among them.

²⁸ Jenco, "What Does Heaven Ever Say?" A Methods-Centered Approach to Cross-Cultural Engagement."

²⁹ For the purposes of my argument, it is not necessary to reflect on this possibility or on her success at making this argument. Rather, I want us to focus on whether the method could be used for question-driven research. Leigh K. Jenco, *Making the Political: Founding and Action in the Political Theory of Zhang Shizhao* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

³⁰ Jenco, "What Does Heaven Ever Say?" A Methods-Centered Approach to Cross-Cultural Engagement," 753.

First, there is the claim that there is something culturally distinct about this form of fundamentalism. This claim is empirically suspect in two ways: 1) as the need for the argument suggests, these claims were not claims of culture, but instead claims of certain people within the context; and 2) Jenco seems to suggest that the fundamentalist turn in the face of contemporary change is culturally distinct. Within their times, as Jenco's historical and contextual reading of these texts suggests, these authors did not represent a culturally distinct voice, but rather were part of internal disagreements and were critical voices within their contexts, not representative of them.

Further, while I appreciate that each of these authors offers his own distinct version of fundamentalism as immanent critique and that each executes it in ways that are particular to their contexts, once we generalize from their particular work to take instruction to other forms of inquiry, we recognize this as an approach that many others find essential, particularly in faith-based arguments³¹ but also in secular moral ones.³² The view of Gandhi portrayed in Farah Godrej, which will be discussed shortly, exhibits a sort of hybrid faith-based and secular theory but it shares the import of praxis for understanding. The fundamentalism of Wang Yangming and Kang Youwei is not unique or unique forms of fundamentalism. If they are not unique, then we might consider the role of an experience-informed engagement with the meaning of ideas in question-driven research generally. However, for the study of a global and local relationship determined through processes and relations that span contexts and time, such a methodology would need to be reconceptualized. I will return to this observation.

Second, there is the claim that this method "gestures toward the possibility that critique from *within* Chinese or other non-Western traditions may become a possible form of cross-cultural engagement. We can move from formulating methodologies of comparison to thinking about 'comparative methodologies,' searching for alternative ways to practice political inquiry."³³ The project certainly demonstrates the value of studying the political theory methods of any political theorist, but I don't think it provides evidence that the methods of these two theorists should be applied when studying *other* theorists. Not that they shouldn't be, but the argument doesn't provide evidence that they should be. Learning that a fundamentalist method can yield progressive conclusions or that self-cultivation had an important role in "knowing" for these theorists does not tell us anything about how good these methods were for their

³¹ Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Browsers, *Democracy and Civil Society in Arab Political Thought: Transcultural Possibilities*; Michaëlle Browsers, *Political Ideology in the Arab World: Accommodation and Transformation*, Cambridge Middle East Studies (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Gandhi, *Ashram Observances in Action* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Pub. House, 1955).

³² Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1, no. 3 (1972).

³³ Jenco, "What Does Heaven Ever Say?" A Methods-Centered Approach to Cross-Cultural Engagement," 753.

own inquiry or about how appropriate these methods are for other inquiries. It just reveals that these were methods practiced by these people. We need *other* methods of research and argument to make these claims about the value of those insights.

Third, Jenco claims that to understand Wang and Kang it is important to practice their methods. According to Jenco, Wang demonstrates as much as argues that one cannot even understand his view without a “conversion” experience or at least an attempt at knowing through self-cultivation.³⁴ Jenco suggests that to understand Wang, we similarly need a conversion experience to his interpretation of Confucian thought and to reify this conversion through a practice of self-cultivation in its values and ideas.

This degree of embedded knowing inhibits mutual learning, self-reflection, and humility. No one can “convert” to more than one view at a time. Such a commitment would preclude cross-cultural engagement and criticism. Further, unless self-cultivation means individual critical reflection, it would really limit elite humility by denying the value and role of self-reflection in intellectual thought. We can gain much from learning that this is his view without actually converting to it.

As political theorists exercise elite humility by crossing boundaries and borders and become boarders, whether as individuals or in an increasingly global collaboration we will need to read across methods as well as texts. Jenco has an interesting caution on this point. She argues that comparative methods of political thought that emphasize dialogue and inclusion of voices, bring a democratic sensibility to political theory that inappropriately imports a western value on “other” texts. While certainly the risk of this possibility can be added to the list of predispositions around which we need to practice elite humility, the *risk* of this possibility is *not evidence* of it. Consider in Jenco’s own expositions of Wang or Kang how often she includes references to *other* scholars’ interpretations. Presumably her reading was broader than these, and she made selections about who to include. Presumably, many of the commentators who offered feedback offered additional texts to consider. Considering a broad range of input could be consistent with a latent or not so latent political impulse, but it also could just be good scholarship and a good way of exercising elite humility. When they are taking up a new topic, I want my students to read what everyone else has written on the topic, not to be good democrats, but to be good scholars.

Again, this is not a commentary about political life, but rather about intellectual life and one with which I agree. Broadening, boundary crossing, and welcoming in others are good ways of exercising elite humility and humanity. There is nothing particularly western or democratic about these practices and arguably nor are these practices that westerners exercise with comparative advantage.

³⁴ Is Understanding Religion Compatible with Believing. In Bryan R. Wilson, ed *Rationality*. Blackwell 1970, p.

To conclude, let me ask whether this self-cultivated Confucianism offers insights into justice, injustice, and their transborder dimensions in ways that might help us engage with struggle. The short answer is “no.” I might learn from how people in struggle in the Khulna region have developed intra-community and inter-community relationships through processes of migration, mutual support, or cross-community expertise (like between the shipbuilding community and the fishing community). But there is nothing in Wang, Kang, or Jenco that led me to those observations or that enriches my understanding of them. That may not be the right test of the methods Jenco proposes. Perhaps there is a more immanent use of those methods that would provide insight into a problem across time, context, and history, but as Jenco instructs us in their use, they cannot function across time and context. By contrast Tariq Ramadan and Michaelle Browers are two very different scholars, each working on aspects of Muslim thought who have developed methodologies that strengthen immanent critique and faith-based immanent critique.³⁵ If we want to understand the work of Wang and Kang and its import, we might do well to compare their work with others who are developing comparative methods.

Towards a “comparative” political theory

Andrew March characterizes comparative political theory in a way that might be entirely consistent with Jenco’s characterization. In his view, what makes a political theory “comparative” is that its subject might be construed as “alien.” As we saw above, Jenco believes that there are some views that are able to be isolated and that the way to know them is to enter them through study and practice. By contrast, March confronts that claim with the view that all claims are alien.

Andrew March is interested in defining the meaning of comparative political theory with respect to two approaches to political theory: “scholarly” and “engaged”. In his view “scholarly” political theorists ask questions out of scholarly interest in particular subjects; their subject is one that history treated as political. This is the approach that I characterized above as “methodology-driven.” He identifies the dialogic approach as being of this category. By contrast, according to March, “engaged political theory is primarily aimed at investigating whether some set of ideas are the *right ideas for us*.” Engaged political theory is political in the sense that the right ideas matter for the political life of “us.” I characterized this approach as “question-driven.”

March seeks to clarify what “comparative” political theory should be in juxtaposition with his characterization of what Anglophone comparative theory scholars in the United States do.³⁶

³⁵ Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*; Browers, *Democracy and Civil Society in Arab Political Thought: Transcultural Possibilities*.

³⁶ Andrew F. March, “What Is Comparative Political Theory?,” *The Review of Politics* 71, no. 04 (2009): 538. He reviews the landscape of methods I discussed above and is concerned that the field “comparative political theory”

In his view comparative political theory can contribute to the study of religious doctrine and thought, and it must do so with the assumption that in studying across traditions the subjects are “semiautonomous” applications of reason.³⁷ Further, comparative political theory should focus on “orthodox” and non-marginal views.³⁸ In March’s view, elite humility is an inappropriate resource. Rather comparative political theory should focus on questions or concepts of profound disagreement without an expectation of agreement across semiautonomous orthodoxies, and working through the richness of these ideas should be the “centerpiece” of comparative political theory.³⁹

March’s exposition is not as much a call for what political theory should be as it is a desire to define and delimit a boundary around a subfield of comparative political theory. This approach defines the field of comparative political theory with the same tools that newer academic disciplines used to define themselves in the 19th and 20th centuries. Such an approach ignores the critical histories of political theory. If we were to take these into account, when political theorists “define” the field, we should lay out a landscape in which scholars might choose to develop their work, not outline its boundaries.

March’s view of comparative political theory limits its relevance for question-driven theory to those puzzles defined by orthodox intellectual elites who have created the record of intellectual history. However, a question-driven approach should be able to engage the questions generated by non-elites and their struggles.

Towards a cosmopolitan political thought

Farah Godrej rejects the characterization of comparative political theory as best understood as sharing some substantive concerns. She promises a method – which she calls “cosmopolitan” – that should address questions across context and maybe time (which Jenco’s could not) and which might be a resource for question-driven political theory reflective of elite humility.⁴⁰

has “certain ambiguities.” However, the article suffers from a disconnection of his criticism from his literature review. When he lists the ambiguities and vagaries he refers to “comparative political theory” rather than to particular authors. For example, “comparative political theory often does not know where to go with its dialogue” *ibid.*, 551. Despite reference to thinkers from all over the world in his literature review, in the substantive portion of the article and it is opening framing his references to US comparative political theorists and to “non-Western” views suggests he understands the challenge of defining the field of comparative political theory to be a challenge for US and perhaps inclusively Anglophone political theorists.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 553ff.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 556.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 560.

⁴⁰ Godrej, “Towards a Cosmopolitan Political Thought: The Hermeneutics of Interpreting the Other.”; Godrej, *Cosmopolitan Political Thought: Method, Practice, Discipline*.

Godrej echoes March's assumption of semiautonomous intellectual traditions while characterizing work that breaks down that assumption as also within the field of comparative political theory. With Jenco she shares an intuition that to do *comparative political theory* is to do something different from *political theory* and that this difference is methodological. The question is, how can a methodology-centered approach to comparative political theory be question-driven.

Godrej provides a three-part methodology for doing comparative political theory. First, the theorist adopts an existentialist relationship to the text; that is, she studies and indeed adopts the language and cultural experience associated with the intellectual and lived tradition of the text. Second, the theorist shifts from a scholar immersed in a tradition to a fieldworker, living the life and values described in the text. Third, the fieldworker becomes again a theorist and tries to articulate to an audience, which has not undergone these existential and experiential transformations, the meaning of the text.

Of course, very few elite scholars are going to have the time and ability to "[become] one with the ideas in the text."⁴¹ Despite this limitation, the methodology that Godrej articulates is a form of political thought that can contribute to greater understanding of any politically important concept because it specifically includes an account of how the work of the privileged cosmopolitan political theorist can be a bridge across boundaries and borders.

The methods of her cosmopolitan political thought may complement methods of multi-sited ethnography that are essential to understanding the ideas of injustice and community that attention to struggles reveal are important. However, if cosmopolitan comparative thought is at heart an academic enterprise, then it is insufficiently able to stimulate our thinking about concepts that emerge from political struggle as theoretically relevant. We can always learn something from any inquiry, but such cosmopolitan reflections will not be central to question-driven research. How could they be? In an age of elite humility, how could we try to understand the struggle of people through the texts of their elites. In rural Khulna the literature of many Bengali poets – and poet philosophers – is known through song. And these poems and music stir the soul and inspire pride. But when it comes to understanding their injustices and community struggles, the music they enjoy is performance relative to the analysis they offer of their political and environmental situations.

Conclusion

Question-driven theory and comparative political theory are not mutually incompatible. A political theory needs to be relevant to a full range of political questions

⁴¹ Godrej, "Towards a Cosmopolitan Political Thought: The Hermeneutics of Interpreting the Other," 141.

related to how we should live. In order to continue to be a dynamic discipline, any defining of what is “political” must reflect with humility the range of questions theorists have brought to us⁴² across time and the globe in writing and in the observation of struggles, including those struggles necessary to get an issue recognized as political. I agree with Rajeev Bhargava that theory is committed to “full-blooded sensitivity to the entire web of concepts and a commitment to its articulation.”⁴³

If our goal as contemporary theorists is to participate in the on-going global enterprise of articulating with full-blooded sensitivity the web of concepts (including the concept of the political) and disputes about them that have been important to political life, then surely we should discuss methods for doing so without using the discussion of methods as a mechanisms for delimiting the boundaries of our sensitivities.

By thinking about *how* we do comparative political theory, we can do political theory better, and the modifier “comparative” will one day be viewed as a modifier necessary for this time in the history of political thought and development of our discipline. One day such references will date the theorist because in fact what we learn from how we do comparative inquiry improves how we do theory.⁴⁴

Yet for now, the descriptor “comparative” does suggest one way of exercising elite humility in political theory. There are other ways to exercise elite humility, some of which – like feminism, post-colonial theory, and grounded theory – can destabilize scholarly elitism as well. If the academic discipline of political theory trends toward delimiting comparative political theory by its methods in a way that renders it irrelevant to contexts and concepts that are political, then neither comparative political theory nor political theory will be very political.

Whenever we ask the question “How should we live?” we ask it relative to something – often some experience of how we should not be living. The question might be provoked by an image like the one I provided in this article of people hanging on against insecure sources of livelihood due to environmental, political, and economic forces that are set in motion far away from their daily struggles. A question-driven approach to comparative political thought focuses on the concern that how we are living is politically problematic. Elite humility helps us determine the questions that should take our attention and these should include questions related to struggles for justice and livelihood.

⁴² Bhargava, *What Is Political Theory and Why Do We Need It?*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁴ Dallmayr, “Beyond Monologue.”; Euben, *Journeys to the Other Shore: Muslim and Western Travelers in Search of Knowledge*, see especially chapter 2; March, “What Is Comparative Political Theory?,” 536-37.

For global poverty-related and environment-related struggles, it seems pretty ridiculous to center the concepts and arguments in orthodox intellectual texts, whether from one or many intellectual traditions. In fact, as any of these will be passed to us through elite texts, to focus on methods of and for elite inquiry for understanding seems a misguided approach to elite humility. Of course, many of these texts do have something to offer so elite humility and problem-based inquiry should not be misunderstood as conspiring to delegitimize any particular approach. As we develop the field of comparative political thought, let's have some humility about an approach's powers and responsibilities in the face of the dilemmas that are of moral importance today.

Political, economic, and socially empirical problems with normative import are the important questions for political theorists. Because many of these are timeless, the history of political thought is a likely source for a wealth of reflective insight. Because these issues have been relevant in the world and over time, the historical intellectual traditions that may provide insight may come from anywhere. Because these issues are pressing now, contemporary theorists around the world should draw on each others' reflective insights in order to broaden our understanding of the web of relevant concepts and help clarify our articulations of them. Finally, because these issues are pressing on how many people live today and how they may survive in the future, their own reflections on how they have been surviving (and empirical reflection by others on how they have been surviving) may also be important.

The vastness of these ambitions extends beyond the capacity of any individual's life's work. Therefore, political theory relevant to the significant challenges posed by these ambitious normative puzzles needs to be a global enterprise, informed by scholars engaged in these ranges of theoretical work over time. In the 21st century the field of political theory and comparative political theory is global, not in the sense that any articulation of the complex web of concepts would be globally agreed to or that even such agreement should be the goal, but rather that our interlocutors in this endeavor are not predetermined by our training, experience, or imagination but may come from any place, time, or family of inquiry.

Because we work in academic disciplines in which having a high horse may be necessary, I understand the desire to keep our methodological high horses tethered close by. It is professionally and ethically responsible for us to be able to give an account of how we do what we do so that we can teach and learn. But let's remember that as a field we have a long history that predates by millennia our being a discipline, and the strength of the discipline must at least in part be due to the fact that we have served humanity in time-bound and timeless ways for these millennia. Let us remain committed to doing so as we define our discipline by clarifying its methods. Let us remain the committed teachers and political advisors our kind has always been, devoted to considering the landscape of ideas and human experience.

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