Introduction

The Practice of Deparochializing Political Theory

Melissa S. Williams

1.1 Introduction

We are living through an epochal change in the structure of our social and political orders, a transformation whose trajectory we cannot predict but whose consequences we will surely not escape. These transformations are taking hold, as well, in the academic field that dedicates itself to grasping the world of politics in thought. A growing number of political theorists have taken the potentially radical step of asking if and how their discipline can be modified to grapple with a world no longer centered in the West, either politically or conceptually. Although Western intellectual traditions continue to dominate the academic journals and introductory course syllabi, the emergence of “comparative political theory” – the inclusion of historically marginalized and “non-Western” thought in the way we define the parameters of political theory – is already transforming the field.

Most accounts of the purposes of comparative political theory cite the changes wrought by globalization and late modernity as their starting points, but the rationales and motivations for “deparochializing political theory” are diverse. For some, a shifting geopolitics adds warrant to a shift of our scholarly attention to the thought traditions of rising powers such as China and India or to Islamic thought as a resource for understanding political Islamism in the twenty-first century. Some are motivated by democratic or postcolonial concerns to press for the inclusion of historically suppressed voices in a global conversation about a shared political future. For many, the new realities generated by a now-globalized modernity, from the displacement of territorially bounded
sovereign states as the presumptive unit of political order to the warming
of the planet, give us ample reason to look to marginalized, non-Western,
or non-modern voices for ways of imagining alternative modes of political
relationship.  

It has been two decades since the expression “comparative political
theory” was introduced into our lexicon by Roxanne Euben’s pathbreaking
scholarship on Islamic political thought and by Fred Dallmayr’s
intrepid work in engaging non-Western thinkers and texts. It took
another decade before we began to see a significant upsurge in the number
of works on non-Western political thought by scholars who self-identify
as political theorists or political philosophers. Euben and Dallmayr
added momentum to a development that had been underway for some
years. Anthony Parel, for example, had addressed work on Gandhian
political thought to English-speaking political theorists since the late
1960s. Bhikhu Parekh’s book on Gandhi’s political philosophy appeared
nearly a decade before Euben’s and Dallmayr’s articles. As a field, politi-
cal theory has been a relative latecomer to cross-cultural engagement,
with figures such as Raimundo Panikkar building early bridges between
political theory, comparative philosophy, and comparative religion.

Although comparative political theory is the most important new
development in the discipline over the last several decades, the decentering
of Western thought in the larger field of political theory is still in its early
stages. The transformation of a field of scholarly endeavor may be moti-
vated by changes in the world it studies, but it is not generated by those
changes, as if they were natural forces to which the world of ideas
inevitably adapts. The academy is a conservative institution, for better
and for worse: it holds fast to the frameworks by which knowledge claims
have been established in the past. Unsettling, adapting, and multiplying
those frameworks requires the conscious and intentional agency of people
who go against the grain of habit and convention because they judge these
to be inadequate to the kind of knowledge we ought to be seeking.

Thus there are structural reasons, deeply rooted in the academy in
general and political theory in particular, why it is difficult to respond to
the common and sound intuition that in a globalized era we need to
globalize our understanding of political thought as an object of under-
standing and political theory as an academic discipline. The professiona-
ization of the academy generates immense disincentives to individual
scholars to reach beyond the boundaries of the field as they received it.
For undergraduates, it remains likely that their first introduction to politi-
tical theory will be a survey of a Western “canon,” giving them the
impression that, if they are curious about non-Western thought, this is not the field for them. The series that is preeminent for producing authoritative texts for student use, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought, has recently become global in its scope. This work is still in its early stages, however, and many interesting and important texts in non-Western political thought remain untranslated. For graduate students, it is still difficult to find the necessary supervisory capacity for topics in non-Western thought within the confines of political science departments. If they are lucky, they will gain the support of political theory faculty to recruit colleagues from other disciplines to provide the necessary expertise and guidance – but it is safer, professionally, to cleave to Western thought. For older scholars trained in Western thought, who nonetheless agree on the importance of deparochializing political theory, there is the risk of venturing into new scholarly terrain without hope (or even the intention) of developing the expertise that would equip them to contribute to specialized debates.

The distinctiveness of the present volume arises from its contributors’ joint commitment to resisting these tendencies in the academy by devoting themselves, over a period of years, to generating and sustaining a conversation about the purposes, subject matter, and methods of comparative political theory. This conversation has the qualities that Anthony Laden ascribes to reasoning as a social practice, in which participants offer reasons in the spirit of invitation rather than as authoritative and decisive considerations that should govern the relationship between them. The aim has not been to reach agreement on the tasks or scope of comparative political theory, about which the contributors continue to disagree, sometimes pointedly. The conversation has changed and sharpened contributors’ judgments about these questions, but that has been a side effect of the shared judgment that brought them together: that the conversation itself is of key importance for our times.

The interlocutors in this conversation approach it from a wide range of social positions within the academy. Some are senior political theorists who are not experts in any non-Western thought tradition but who have gone to significant lengths to foster the development of comparative political theory and to engage with its practitioners. Others took the risk as younger scholars to become expert in thought traditions that were foreign to their native cultures. All of the contributors played roles in a multiyear international research project, East Asian Perspectives on Politics, whose purpose was to foster the field of comparative political theory through a series of conferences held throughout East Asia and in
Canada. The experimental design of the project was based on the supposition that deparochializing political theory is a long-term, even intergenerational task that requires the sustained commitment of both those who are experts in non-Western thought and those whose expertise is rooted in Euro-American traditions. It requires a conscious choice, together with a willingness to step outside our comfort zones and actively disrupt our familiar frames of reference. All of the contributors to this volume have demonstrated these qualities through their participation in the project and in many other ways over the years. The individual chapters in the volume reflect the contributors’ diverse methodological and substantive scholarly approaches but also exemplify, individually and collectively, the depth of engagement that is at once so difficult and so necessary for the field to move forward. The volume’s origins in a project with a regional focus on East Asia are reflected in many of the chapters, but this focus does not define the volume as a whole. Rather, the authors sometimes draw on philosophical or historical resources rooted in China or Japan (as well as from South Asian, Indigenous, Islamic, Buddhist, and Latin American thought and practice) to explore alternative pathways toward “deparochializing political theory.”

The neologism “deparochialize” gestures toward the idea that, despite our disagreements, we converge on the idea that a defining purpose of political theory is, as Quentin Skinner once put it, to equip us to “become less parochial in our attachment to our inherited beliefs.” Its grammatical form as a present participle in the volume’s title, *Deparochializing Political Theory*, expresses the authors’ shared judgment that our common endeavor is a demanding, active, ongoing, and incomplete practice. The chapters in the volume exemplify the contributors’ considered judgments about what sort of practice it must be for them as individuals, given their understanding of the tasks of political theory and their more specialized scholarly commitments. For some, such as James Tully, deparochializing political theory is both a form of political praxis and a practice of the self that does not flinch from the epistemic and psychological challenges of engaging with the thought of culturally different others within profoundly unequal power relations. For other contributors, the practice of deparochializing political theory generates experimentation, play, and disruption in relation to the concepts and categories through which contemporary political theory denotes political regimes. In Chapter 7, Baogang He and Mark E. Warren adopt this approach in relation to the categories of authoritarianism, meritocracy, and democracy; Youngmin Kim (Chapter 4) in relation to republicanism; Joseph Chan and Franz...
Mang (Chapter 6) in relation to popular sovereignty; and my own contribution (Chapter 8) in relation to democracy in the global era. A more radical possibility for the practice of deparochializing political theory, opened up in the chapters by Leigh K. Jenco (Chapter 3) and Ken Tsutsumibayashi (Chapter 5), is to replace the knowledge practices we have received from our own societies with those of other societies, constituting a new intellectual center for our political thought and action.

As an intergenerational project, deparochializing political theory requires not only that we widen the scope of our scholarship but also that we change the way we introduce our students to the practice of political theory. Every time we teach an introductory course based on one or another understanding of the Western “canon” we risk reproducing the flawed presupposition that political thought is a Western phenomenon rather than a human one. Consequently, as Stephen Salkever argues (Chapter 9), we have reason to regard comparative political theory as first and foremost a commitment to a certain kind of education, one suited to a global age—and only secondarily as a disciplinary specialty. We need to reflect critically on how to perform this teaching task well but also on how to do it in a manner that addresses our students where they are, in the global order as it is. Teaching comparative political theory in North America, as Salkever has done, is not precisely the same undertaking as it is in Singapore, where ideas inflected by Indian and Islamic traditions circulate alongside ideas with roots in China and Europe, as Terry Nardin relates (Chapter 10). And, as Duncan Ivison shows in his contribution (Chapter 11), the challenges of globalizing the political theory curriculum must be read through the lens of the larger reasons for globalizing the curriculum, a goal often mentioned by academic administrators but seldom backed by thorough and compelling justification.

As Nardin suggests in his reflections on the distinctive demands of teaching comparatively in the Singaporean context, the practice of deparochializing political theory demands attentiveness to the particular positions we inhabit as scholars and teachers, not only in relation to our methodological, theoretical, and pedagogical commitments but also in relation to global power structures and their histories. Our judgments about which modes of thought need to be “decentered” and “recentered,” to borrow Jenco’s terms, are appropriately and necessarily shaped by our judgments about how to locate ourselves within these larger structures. As Tsutsumibayashi shows in Chapter 5, what counts as “East” or “West” looks quite different from the perspective of Japan as compared with Chinese or European perspectives. James Tully’s approach to deparochializing political theory (Chapter 2) is
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deeply informed by the injustice of settler colonialism in his native context of Canada as an element within the much larger history of modern European imperialism and its ongoing effects. Chan and Mang (Chapter 6), working in the East Asian context of Hong Kong, begin their project of deparochialization by acknowledging that most “East–West” comparisons leave Islamic thought out of the conversation between Confucian and European traditions, an omission they begin to redress. The challenges of deparochializing political theory, in short, vary according to how scholars are positioned in different parts of the world, the thought traditions that prevail where they reside, and the power relations that shape their contexts of thought.13

Whether in the final analysis comparative political theory proves to be a specialized subfield, at the present stage of the debates there are good reasons to regard deparochializing political theory as an ethos and a practice. Taken together, the chapters in this volume open up divergent but potentially complementary ways of understanding what sort of a practice it is: a practice of transforming a discipline, a practice of education, a political practice. The volume as a whole reinforces recent pleas for methodological pluralism in comparative political theory.14 The contributors demonstrate that a commitment to deparochialization is compatible with a wide array of approaches to political theory, from the study of ancient thought (Salkever), ideas-in-context (Tsutsumibayashi), and the history of political thought (Kim, Nardin) to analytic approaches (Chan and Mang), methods-centered approaches (Jenco), the critical theory of power relations (Tully), the construction of regime taxonomies (He and Warren), and contemporary normative and democratic theory (Ivison, Williams). The authors also show, by example, that deparochializing political theory is not the exclusive province of those who have developed their scholarly expertise in a body of non-Western thought, even though their scholarship will do the most important substantive work in transforming the field. Rather, it is a common responsibility for all political theorists, department colleagues, and university administrators who are persuaded by the claim that a global era demands that we expand our resources for understanding politics beyond those generated by the history of political experience in European and settler colonial societies.

1.2 OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

James Tully’s practice of “deparochializing political theory” has developed over decades of teaching and scholarship through which he has performed his distinctive vision of “public philosophy” as a practical critical activity.
His critical approach is indebted to Foucault, carrying out the “work that thought brings to bear on itself...through the practice of a knowledge that is foreign to it.” For Tully, the thought upon which we need to gain this critical purchase is, above all, the thought that generated and sustains a now-globalized modernity, reproducing its systems of domination. The origins of global modernity lie in the formation of the territorially bounded sovereign state in Europe but through imperial expansion and the subjugation of Indigenous peoples in the New World (initially) and globally (eventually), a process that has unfolded over the last half-millennium. For Tully, then, globalization provides the context, the motivation, and the resources for deparochializing political theory. The context is set by “global relationships of horrendous inequality, dependency, exploitation and environmental damage.” The motivation arises from the conviction that “there is no way to address the multiple crises of globalization that does not pass through engagement in genuine dialogues among and across the traditions of political thought present on this small planet.” And the resources include the exemplars of genuine dialogue from whose non-violent practices of resistance and “diverse citizenship” we have the opportunity to learn because of the increased interdependence and networked communication that arise with globalization.

In his contribution to this volume (Chapter 2), Tully takes us deep into the phenomenology of the kind of dialogue across traditions that is capable of disrupting the unjust power structure that currently connects diverse traditions in the modern global order. He contrasts “genuine dialogue” in which traditions have equal status as forms of human understanding with the many kinds of “false dialogue” that are likely to emerge under circumstances of unequal power and power-knowledge. As beings that make sense of the world through our received traditions, we tend to project onto others the terms that make the world meaningful to us—a tendency that is all the more pronounced when our position of privilege in a structure of social power is thereby secured. Deparochializing our political thought must begin by “reparochializing” it, recognizing that the truths we hold to be self-evident and universal have arisen within a sociohistorically specific context. Thinking together across traditions is exceedingly demanding emotionally and psychologically. The “deep listening” required for genuine dialogue requires practices of the self, such as meditation and nonattachment, that must be cultivated over time before dialogue can generate reciprocal elucidation and transformation. But when we succeed, participants in this dialogue can achieve not only mutual understanding but also the possibility of bringing to light...
ways of “thinking, judging, deliberating and acting together in response to the situation they share that were unimaginable and unthinkable prior to the dialogue.”

Leigh K. Jenco, whose work on modern Chinese thought has made her a leader in the field of comparative political theory, also situates the contributions of “deparochializing political theory” in relation to the realities of globalization (Chapter 3). But her vision for the field projects possibilities for radical self-transformation that go beyond even the emancipatory aspirations articulated in Tully’s ideal of a genuine dialogue among traditions. Transcultural dialogue is a worthy goal, Jenco affirms, but, because it begins from the supposition that human thought is rooted or embedded in received ideational frameworks and social relations, it also supposes that political thought must always proceed from where we are now and accept, at least initially, the limits on what we are capable of thinking that we inherit from our sociohistorical situatedness. The more radical possibility she envisions is that we might instead leap out of our ideational skins and into an altogether different form of thought developed by and for different people living in a different context, using their modes of knowledge and knowledge-seeking as the platform from which we innovate our own thought and practice.

Such a feat might appear almost superhuman, but Jenco argues that we know it is humanly possible because it has been done. In her most recent book, *Changing Referents: Learning Across Space and Time in China and the West,* Jenco examines the pursuit of “Western Learning” among a group of Chinese thinkers who formed a common purpose in response to the crises of late Qing (1644–1912 CE) political rule and the growing encroachments of European imperialism. She shows that an intergenerational succession of intellectuals found the answers for China’s future in the active displacement of Chinese thought traditions by Western traditions of thought. They trained themselves in the art of *bianfa,* “changing referents,” by replacing Chinese knowledge practices with Western ones. They formed intellectual communities of inquiry around a common commitment not only to learn Western ideas and apply them to Chinese circumstances but also to think from within Western forms of thought in order to innovate, both intellectually and politically, for their own context and its problems. This was not a dialogue seeking a new ground of shared understanding between Chinese and Western traditions but a decision to inhabit Western modes of knowledge and constitute a new discursive community whose participants were not Chinese and Western “Others” but rather Chinese adepts in “Western Learning.” These
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scholars thus anticipated, in many ways, what we are now doing when we seek to deparochialize political theory in a radical way.

In her chapter for this volume, Jenco revisits her argument that the most ambitious way of understanding the project of “deparochializing political theory” goes beyond “decentering” European thought traditions in the ways we understand politics, thus making space for non-Western thought traditions as constituent elements in the discipline we call political theory. Rather, a more thoroughgoing deparochialization of our discipline would recenter historically marginalized thought traditions as the starting point for critical inquiry and theoretical innovation, eventually yielding new theories that count as knowledge that is relevant to our own sensemaking in the world, knowledge for us and not merely about them. Jenco elaborates this gestalt-shifting approach to cross-cultural theorizing through a discussion of some of its best exemplars, including Stephen Angle’s work on sagehood and Ingrid Jordt’s work on Theravada Buddhism.

In Chapter 4, Youngmin Kim’s scholarly engagement with the history of Chinese political thought, including his recent book-length treatment of that subject, has led him to grapple with a problem that is central to the project of deparochializing political theory: how to delineate the boundaries of a thought tradition such that it is tractable as an object of study and deepened understanding. Kim problematizes the notion that comparative political theory can rest on stylized wholes such as “the Western tradition” or “Confucianism”; any specification of the characteristic features or representative thinkers of such traditions, and every periodization of their histories, are exercises in boundary-drawing that do violence to the plurality of intellectual contributions that constitute them and the historical problem-situations to which they were addressed. “Confucianism,” he argues, is proving useful for a wide array of twenty-first-century theoretical and ideological agendas, but the striking variety of contemporary “Confucianisms” raises the question of whether it is operating as a floating signifier, “fugitive concept,” or even “a pack of tricks played on the dead.”

Yet these worries do not lead Kim to abandon the project of deparochializing political theory as a practice of comparison between bounded systems of political thought. Rather than looking to geographic regions or broad intellectual traditions to provide the requisite boundaries for the units of comparison, Kim turns to the self-identification of individuals as participants in a common project, bearers of “a collective identity that they themselves construct.” The unity of “Chinese political thought” is generated by individuals’ reference to China as the site or object of
political concern. In his chapter in this volume, Kim argues that the tradition of True Way Learning (TWL), a branch of Confucian tradition that became dominant in mid- to late imperial China, constitutes a sufficiently well-bounded community of thought and practice to serve as a useful comparator with similarly bounded traditions in other historical contexts. In this way, TWL was a localized knowledge community of the sort that Jenco highlights in Chapter 3, one whose claims about political life were intended to be, and potentially were, generalizable beyond the context in which they arose.

TWL is a particularly interesting object for comparative study, on Kim’s account, because its precepts contradict the stereotype that Confucian political thought is hierarchical and authoritarian—a common Orientalist trope. Kim situates the rise of TWL in the transition from the Northern Song period (960–1127 CE), in which a meritocratic class of literati came to play an important legitimating role in the imperial state, to the Southern Song period (1127–1279 CE), in which a diminished state left many trained as literati without a prospect of officeholding within the state bureaucracy. In the Northern Song period, the centralization of state authority went hand in hand with the formalization of principles of legitimate authority (guoshi) that were increasingly seen as binding on both emperor and scholar-officials. Because the role of scholar-official was technically open to any who could pass the civil service examinations, the Northern Song period represented a move in the direction of inclusiveness, participation, and equality as compared with the preceding Tang dynasty. TWL emerged following the collapse of the Northern Song dynasty, recodifying principles of political authority as universally valid precepts of individual virtue and combining personal morality with an ethos of service to good governance at the local scale. Practitioners of TWL imagined themselves as members of what Kim calls a “metaphysical republic,” connected to one another across vast geographic spaces not through the formal political institutions of the state but through their joint normative commitment to live in accordance with law-like principles (li). Because its practitioners envisioned their roles in local leadership as supportive of (rather than as competitors to) the imperial state, TWL buttressed the state’s capacity to govern a vast territory with a relatively small bureaucracy.

Kim’s reconstruction of TWL as a variety of republican thought enables a comparison with republican strands in modern Euro-American thought. He draws strong parallels to Kantian republicanism, both because what unites “citizens” is not necessarily a formal status within a state but