States of Nature: Consilience, Syncretism, and Challenges for Comparative Political Thought

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Conclusion

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Without being too trite, it is no shock to say that we live in an age of globalized knowledge production, dissemination, and consumption. This book is a small example of this globalized process, which would have been inordinately more difficult—if not impossible—to accomplish even ten or twenty years ago. Yet the technological miracles of modern communication (e.g., email and the Internet) made it viable. This volume is, in and of itself, an example of the global production of the modern intellectual enterprise. In looking at the fifteen contributors to this book, they represent institutions or locales in at least six different states in the United States (California, Kansas, Maryland, North Carolina, New York, Texas), and roughly half a dozen different countries or territories (Canada, Guam, Hong Kong, Israel, Lebanon, Palestine, and the United States). Yet I would suggest that while it is worth observing the breadth of geographic distribution in our authorial membership, that only five to seven (out of more than two hundred plus possible) nation-states or aspiring nation-states are represented. And so, even while we recognize the increasingly global nature of knowledge production, access to the means of knowledge production is still constrained by social, economic, cultural, linguistic, and inherently political factors. Which voices, cultures, or ideas are being left out, or perhaps purposefully excluded, from the process of knowledge production?

Comparative Political Theory (CPT) as a path of inquiry is in part an attempt to come to grips with the discord and inherent tension between forces of the global and universal, and more local or culturally bound conceptions of the political. CPT is inherently a global undertaking, yet one that exposes the raw cultural basis of “universal” political and philosophical concepts. There is a distinct parochialism in the generation of knowledge production in the traditional academic environment. So it is this intersection between cultural specificity and universal applicability that CPT scholars seek to exploit. At least that was part of the motive for this particular undertaking. Still, whose voices are being left out?
It should not pass unnoticed that roughly half of this volume is dedicated to various excursions and engagements with Chinese philosophy. The other half pulls from several traditions, including Islamic and Indian philosophy. One research agenda for CPT will be to go beyond just engaging with other "great literate traditions." While certainly these traditions are the easiest for text-based peoples to access and engage, they should not be the limit of our non-Western excursion. There are at least three challenges that arise from this. First, there is the most obvious project of effectively engaging the aforementioned great literate traditions. I envision this as if those involved were engineering and building a bridge—the project requires guidance from both banks, and both sides. The chasm being bridged is both linguistic and disciplinary, so for CPT to be fully effective scholars within the native languages of the various traditions will be crucial in the evolution of the field. This volume reflects some degree of progress with regard to this process.

As a corollary to the "great" literate traditions challenge, is the "not quite so great" or "minor" literary traditions challenge. As one becomes familiar with the formerly foreign tradition, we can recognize that there are minor, competing, or completely distinct traditions within what were formerly thought (at least from the outside) to be more unified literary traditions. For example, within "Indian" philosophy, there are numerous strands and distinct literary traditions: multiple varieties of Buddhist thought, Jainism, Sikhism, pre- and post-Islamic-influenced periods, and so on. Similarly, the field of Islamic philosophy is varied (with significant sectarian divisions), as is the more "unified" Chinese body of philosophy. So merely fleshing out the full scope of literary traditions, both in classical and modern form, is likely to be a lengthy, ongoing, and probably contentious undertaking. CPT offers a mechanism for addressing this second challenge, and this book at least makes an overture in this regard, including offerings from outside the standard great traditions. Certainly, more needs to be done to engage scholars that are versed in many of these more specific areas, and this may be a fruitful research agenda for young, up-and-coming scholars as well as more established area studies experts, and scholars who are interested in new applications of existing research agendas.

The third challenge can be deduced from the preceding two: what of non-literary, predominantly oral, and indigenous traditions? There is already a growing and active discussion surrounding the nature of African political thought (n.b., Eze 1998, Wiredu 1998, Tempea 1959, Hountondji 1996), especially in context of postcolonial philosophy. So this also appears to be an avenue of ready engagement for CPT scholars. Other indigenous thought, be it Native American or First Nations, Maori and their more "successful" post-colonial interactions in South Oceania, or any of the thousands of imperiled indigenous groups around the world, offer a rich social tapestry that holds potential for exploration. While not
Conclusion

all would have commentary on "the state" and formal political philosophy per se, most peoples in the world do have notions of rule, order, social justice, and what makes some approaches preferable to others. In many ways, any volume examining the "state of nature" would benefit from these perspectives.

For example, in a well-documented reexamination of the European interaction with Tahiti, Bolyanatz (2004: 119) notes that "the French accounts of Tahiti that circulated in the 1770s had a lasting—and deeply misleading—influence on the ways some Europeans saw non-Europeans since then." Tahitian-fueled Pacific Romanticism certainly offered a more optimistic vision of the state of nature—especially when compared to the solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short vision of Hobbes—and one that was eagerly received and in many was needed by Enlightenment-fueled Europe. And yet even that vision was one that was based on a falsehood. For the British ship Dolphin had a prior—and more violent—first encounter with Tahitians than the one widely reported by later French expeditions (who happened to return to Europe before the Dolphin and thus related their experiences first), which became the basis for the "positive" and romanticized vision of Tahiti (Bolyanatz 2004). So even this idyllic vision of the state of nature is one that is contingent, and perhaps only slightly more "real" than a Hobbesian thought-experiment.

Nonetheless, any excursion of "natural" man/woman/human would likely benefit from including voices from indigenous traditions. This volume takes at least a step in this direction. It may be my own tempered inner Pacific Romanticist, but I do have special fondness for the contribution of the chapter from Michael Stoll in this regard; it is a fine combination of fieldwork, interview, and philosophical anthropology. Much more work of a similar type needs to be done, but we can at least offer a reminder, and a suggestion that engagement with non-literary and indigenous peoples can be a productive avenue for CPT scholars, present and future.

ON CONSIDENCE AND SYNCRETISM

I suggest two ways of thinking about the prospects for progress that CPT as a research agenda offers for building a new, or more global and multicultural, mode of political theorizing. These are the dual concepts of consilience and syncretism.

Consilience, or the linking together of principles from different disciplines, especially when forming comprehensive theory, is related to philosophy of science and the generation of scientific knowledge. Here we can envision examining comparative fields of philosophy as laying the basis for a convergence or concordance of evidence supporting a similar outcome. Basically, if evidence—or in the case of CPT, ideas and con-
cepts—from independent sources (cultural traditions) converge to a similar
point, then we have a stronger reason to believe that that point or idea
may be "universal." Consilience suggests that stronger conclusions can
be reached by using independent methods of measurement. In the case of
CPT, each new cultural tradition can potentially be an independent meth-
od of measurement regarding supposedly universal political phenomena,
behaviors, or concepts. If consilience is lacking, if similarities are not
found, then evidence may be deemed as relatively weak. Or in the case
of cross-cultural comparison, evidence (ideas, concepts) should be viewed
as potentially culturally bound and contingent.

Syncretism, the combination of different forms of belief or practice, or
the fusion of two or more originally different infelctional forms, offers a
means of reconciling even disparate (or non-consilient) concepts. More
commonly found in the fields of theology and mythology of religion,
syncretism has ready application to CPT. As a combination of often seem-
ingly contradictory beliefs or thought, syncretism necessarily involves
the merger and analogical comparison of originally discrete traditions.
Within a faith-based usage, this allows for an assertion of underlying
unity or commonality, producing an inclusive approach for interacting
with other faiths. Within CPT, there is recognition of underlying commo-
nality in asking similar questions across disparate cultures related to poli-
tics, from which we can build a synthesized, inclusive, and shared end-
product.

This is the cross-cultural dialogue that Dallmayr and others have
called for. In the end, it takes portions from all involved. It melds por-
tions together, in part creating a new, but not wholly different, idea. This
is what I find exciting about CPT as an enterprise: it is both inherently a
syncretic and consilient process. And those scholars involved in it are
creating something new, progressive, and presumably better than what
has gone before. This process is one that is necessarily not predicated on a
universalistic approach, but rather recognizes the creative power residing
within disparate cultures, even as those cultures interact within a social
science framework of inquiry.

COMPARATIVE POLITICAL THEORY: AN EMERGENT FIELD

As Russell Arben Fox notes in the Introduction, this project emerged
from the Comparative Political Theory working group at the American
Political Science Association (APSA) annual meeting. I would also sug-
gest that similar enterprises are well suited for development at future
meetings of the International Studies Association (ISA) and regional asso-
ciations meetings, across fields of philosophy, political science, and the
wide swath of area studies conferences. It should also not go without
noting that job postings are also starting to explicitly seek scholars in
comparative political theory, and that institutional research programs focused on CPT have been initiated. So the professional employment and training side of the topic does seem to hold some promise.

The emergent field of CPT is in many ways a reaction to the challenges of globalization. CPT is reflective of a growing interest in contributions from Indic, Chinese, or Islamic thought (among others), which can be brought to bear on problems in political philosophy (cf., Scharfstein 1998). The growth of the nascent subfield is in no small part the result of calls by scholars "to replace or supplement the rehearsal of routinized canons with a turn to global, cross-cultural (or ‘comparative’) political theorizing" (Dallmayr 2004, see also Dallmayr 1997). This call echoes APSA's "Perestroika Movement" and may be seen as preceding and paralleling this disciplinary discontent. And as may be expected with a nascent subfield, a discussion as to the merits and methodologies of comparative political theory has emerged (Godrej 2004, 2008, 2009; Bashir 2008; March 2007, 2009b; Jenco 2007; n.b., Black 2011, Shapcott 2011, Beardsworth 2011, Dallmayr 2011), and a basic 'canon' describing comparative political theory as a research project is also coalescing (cf., Parel and Keith 1992; Dallmayr 1998, 1999, 2010; Euben 1999; Godrej 2011; Jenco 2010; March 2009a).

Accordingly, the focus of this volume has been to examine one particular concept in political thought—the "state of nature"—through a comparative and cross-cultural critical dialogue. In an age of increased global interaction and potential civilization-based or cultural conflicts (n.b., Huntington 1993, 1996). this volume takes the rhetorical device of a pre-social contract "state of nature" and seeks to address this concept with non-European thinkers and alternative cultural interpretations. In doing so, this book contributes to the overall vision of a CPT approach, and may serve as a model (good and bad) for how key political concepts may be addressed in a comparative and cross-civilizational manner. Ultimately, the purpose is to develop a richer and multifaceted mode of political theorizing.

As a means of accomplishing this type of cross-civilizational comparison, Anthony Parel's (1992) work offers a personal jumping-off point. Certainly if one questions the universality inherent in Western political philosophy, one is left with the significant task of building a means of comparison with competing or "other" philosophical traditions. Yet, the problems of governance, good citizenship, and justice, are not discrete or uniquely Western problems. So we are able to examine, in context, how different civilizations have treated similar philosophical challenges. Knowledge, being built upon both insight and experience, is conditioned by the civilization—or cultural, linguistic, religious and social contexts—within which it occurs, and which can be discerned by studying culturally significant texts. So, as Parel (1992: 12, referencing Eric Voegelin) argues, "A proper study of such texts, taken in their historical and Intel-
lectual contexts, would reveal that they contain differences as well as similarities with respect to key ideas and assumptions. Further reflection and analysis would reveal that the similarities are more significant than the differences.” From this, one can seek to distill the similarities, revealing rough equivalences between civilizational discourses, thus laying the groundwork for either consilient or syncretic progress.

The notion of *equivalence* in a political philosophical context could be seen as distinct from the notion of “moral equivalence” in ethics (as opposed to “moral relativism”), and instead is an attempt to identify similarities in culturally distinct traditions of dealing with common questions (i.e., “What makes for a ‘good’ king?”). So we are not speaking of equal concepts, but I suggest that this is the avenue for applying the dual concepts of consilience and syncretism. Still, the notion of parity, roughly speaking, between cultural concepts remains. As such, a better field for clarification of the phenomenon—and one more fitting to the concern with texts and the spirit of ideas—is the field of linguistics, specifically translation. Here one is commonly presented with the difficulty inherent in accurately capturing an idea or feeling and having to accurately render it in an “outside” linguistic frame. Two main approaches in translation are “dynamic” (or functional) equivalence—in which the *thought* expressed in a source text is the focus, even if necessary by changing word order, literalness, or voice—and “formal” equivalence, wherein the focus is on rendering texts word-for-word, even at the expense of fluidity in the target language. Clearly then, while there can be a spectrum of translational approaches between these two poles, the tendency for us is to lean heavily toward the dynamic, or functional, similarity in political thought: What is the key thought? How is it best expressed? To what other thoughts is it most similar?

It is in this spirit to which we add, in the Lakatosian notion of progressing a research program. For example, Parel (1992: 12) offers that “the Aristotelian *polites* and the Confucian *junzi*, Indian *dharma* and the pre-modern Western notion of “natural justice,” the Islamic prophet-legislator and the Platonic philosopher-king, may usefully be considered as instances of ‘equivalences.’” Though, reflecting the ability of concepts to cross-pollinate even in historical times, the ordering of “Platonic philosopher-king” and “Islamic prophet-legislator” should be reversed, as Islamic political thought (i.e., post-Mohammed) was heavily influenced by Plato and Aristotle. Nevertheless, the presence of such similarities is what makes comparative political theory possible. It is with this in mind that I argue that both consilience—a convergence of evidence—and syncretism—a combination of beliefs—provide mechanisms for understanding the future of CPT.
Conclusion

SOME DISCIPLINARY IMPLICATIONS OF CPT

It is important to recognize that a comparative political theory approach carries with it some rather weighty disciplinary implications. These implications certainly impact the subfield of political theory, but also extend to include comparative politics, international relations, and by implication the more self-assertively empirical and “scientific” field of U.S. (“American”) politics.

To illustrate rather briefly, the implications for theory are fairly straightforward. Comparative political theory poses a direct challenge to the supposed universality underlying the bulk of the modern Western canon, and the rather specific historical political “experience” from which it is drawn. While a certain amount of relativity is interjected, recall that the search for equivalences seeks not to reduce everything to relativistic terms, it merely enriches the experiential debate. So the challenge for theorists is to recognize that Indic, Islamic, Chinese (and potentially African, and indigenous, and . . . ) political traditions have much to contribute to the philosophical discourse. It is as if you thought you knew the contents of a library, only to find out that it has one, two, three or more additional floors of material that you can explore. This is both a daunting and exciting realization to ponder—there’s a lot of reading to do!

In the field of comparative politics, one can easily conceive that a comparative political theory (CPT) research program has the potential of contributing to a rejuvenated research agenda on political culture. If national or civilizational culture matters, perhaps this is a means of illustrating how and why people think differently about individuality versus collective responsibility, deference to tradition versus emphasis on innovation, view of humans as inherently “good” versus humans as “bad” (or perhaps “fallen”), and why people view their relationship with their government so variously. Furthermore, as research in the field of democratization emphasizes, the notion of “democracy” is a widely interpreted spectrum of political activity, and one that is often at odds with the Western ideal of individualistic, liberal, participatory democracy. So the additional research area of democratization (e.g., Ibrahim 2006), and even comparative legal studies, regarding notions of “justice” (e.g., Brooks 2008) or property rights, could benefit from the research program of comparative political thought. A data-driven approach to this may also be possible, via engagement with the growing public opinion sources providing attitudinal survey feedback along rough cultural lines: the Afrobarometer (www.afrobarometer.org), Asibarometer (www.asibarometer.org), Latinobarometer (www.latinobarometro.org), and similar cross-national attitudinal surveys. Culture does matter, and these are additional tools for understanding just how cultural difference becomes manifest in modern political attitudes and behaviors.
Conclusion

Perhaps because my own background lies in international relations with an interest in IR theory, the implications for IR as a distinct "field" appear more dire. This is perhaps surprising for a field predicated on understanding the interactions (or "relations") between nations—though what many IR scholars really mean are "states," with all the corresponding assumptions thereof. Should not international relations be best suited to an energized research program centered on civilizational difference and similarity? The short answer is, "maybe." Realists, with their concern for power and state security-seeking behavior as central, may have a hard time reconciling alternative conceptions of human behavior (i.e., the Confucian trend to view humans as good, or attracted to virtue) or non-state-centered units of analysis (i.e., civilization, cultures). But one imagines they will find homologues, other Princes offering various recommendations on exercising power. This, even though their philosophical grounding is solidly within the Western canon and which regularly invokes Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes as explanatory models for international political behavior. Or, one may merely ignore discordant philosophical contributions and reflexively carry on undisturbed, ignoring information contrary to one's predispositions.

The two main challenges that CPT offers to the field of International Relations are more serious and deserve genuine consideration: these are the epistemological challenge and the ontological challenge. These will be only briefly outlined here, as each is likely to constitute an independent research program within CPT. Some have raised the epistemic issue (e.g., March 2009, Godrej 2011), but most scholars as yet ignore the ontological implications. Epistemology, taken to mean our theory of knowledge about a given field, also includes considerations of not just what constitutes knowledge, but also how it is acquired and what people know. To reference Plato, it is the subset of that which is both true and believed. So epistemologically for international relations, CPT poses a challenge by presenting alternative spheres of beliefs that seek and claim to represent truth. The agenda of seeking out equivalencies however construed, then, provides a mechanism of translating these alternate truth claims into the realm of shared knowledge.

If IR scholars are to take CPT seriously, then "civilization" or "culture" as a distinct formative social environment must be accounted for. And fortunately, there are scholars whose work is conducive to treating "civilization" as a new mode of analysis, such as Huntington (1993, 1996) and the mini-industry around his thesis, work by Inglehart et al., with the World Values Survey (cf., Inglehart and Welzel 2005), and civilizational work within the CPT frame (cf., Dallmayr and Manoochehri 2007). While the inclusion of "civilization" or "culture" as a salient mode of analysis offers a starting point for an epistemological reconciliation within IR, though each distinct philosophical tradition also embraces contending truth claims, this is likely to be an ongoing enterprise. Also fortunately,
there is an engagement with non-Western IR theorizing beginning to coalesce (n.b., Acharyam and Buzan 2007, Tickner and Blaney 2012, Tickner and Waever 2009, Jones 2006).

Ontologically, however, Comparative Political Thought as a research program qua Lakatos (1970), if taken seriously, poses a more fundamental challenge to International Relations, one which social constructivists are in a better position of managing. Ontology here is taken to mean the study of the nature of being, existence, or reality in addition to the basic categories of being and their relations. Ontology deals with questions concerning what units, entities, or actors exist or can be said to exist, and how such entities can be grouped, hierarchically related, categorized and subdivided according to similarities and differences. As such, seeking “equivalences” or consilience is inherently an ontological enterprise. From a social science perspective, this is troubling because it means the very basis for the object of study is contingent, historically contextual, and perhaps more “social” than “science.”

Different philosophers and civilizational philosophies then offer contending versions of basic ontological questions: Which entities are fundamental? How do the properties of an object relate to the object itself? What constitutes the identity of an object? Why does something exist rather than not? How do we determine what is said to exist? While these are mere examples of basic ontological questions, even the casual reader should start to be troubled for the social science enterprise of international relations, especially as the core assumption of the field are based on a specific socio-cultural, historic and cultural worldview: the European, post-Enlightenment rational-positivistic approach to understanding the world. This is fine and good for “hard” science like physics or chemistry, but more troubling for “social” science where the object of study is primarily an agreed-upon one. Wink-wink, nudge-nudge, say no more. Thus, social scientists need to be more honest about distinguishing “social facts” from “brute facts” (cf., Searle 1995, 2007).

To the extent that comparative political theory forces us to reconsider the foundational, social-fact assumptions (as distinct from objective scientific truth-facts) built in to fields like international relations theory and consider alternative interpretations of social facts (which is most, if not all, of “politics”), we must become better acquainted with philosophy of science, in addition to alternative civilizational philosophies. Why? Because the very foundations of IR as a “discipline” are exposed as the historically contingent social constructs that they are (e.g., the modern nation-state, the individual as the basis for political “rights”, ownership of and what constitutes “property” as an outgrowth of Liberal and particularly Lockean philosophy, notions of political “legitimacy” via a “social contract”).

It is also with this understanding that one can view the position of U.S. politics (i.e., “American”) as a subfield of political science—though,
Conclusion

A running joke among comparatists is that it is merely an overdeveloped, ultra-hermeneutic, one-shot case study. Nevertheless, precisely because the field of U.S. politics is closed referentially and embraces a positivistic, empirical, and overtly "scientific" approach to its undertaking, it may be able to avoid the troubling implications of comparative political thought. Because U.S. "political science" is closed referentially and inward-looking, it can avoid the disquiet offered by CPT and can perhaps deny the "ontological turn" that is being forced upon IR—where claims to universality mandate an encounter with the "other". There is no dominant "other" in U.S. political science, merely the allegedly objective "truth" of a science (social or otherwise). This allows for a false ontological security, which in turn allows for the provision of a false and unquestioned notion of scientific universality. CPT is overt in calling this universality into question.

But again, issues of ontology and epistemology are likely to be the source of an ongoing research agenda. In the meantime, it should suffice to say that CPT as a subfield offers rich veins of intellectual and philosophical ore to mine, for theorists, comparatists, IR scholars and anyone interested in legitimately engaging with "the other." There are certainly challenges ahead for CPT. Some few of these are sketched out in the preceding pages and undoubtedly more will arise. It is hoped that this volume will make some contribution, however small, in addressing the projects of disciplinary discontent, engaging great literate traditions, uncovering jewels of other overlooked literate traditions, and introducing and engaging with oral or indigenous ways of viewing politics and the world. Each of the individual contributors has assisted in this regard, and it remains to be seen what syncretic or consilient understanding of new states of nature will arise from the conversation started in these pages. If nothing else, we know that we have a choice—we do not have to take the fearful vision of Hobbes as a given. It is anything but. We can choose to be less fearful of the other, but we first have to recognize that we have the choice.

NOTES

1. Notably the mere act of counting "real" nation-states is itself a political act. Who counts, and how is this determined? What type of territorial entity is recognized as a "country"? For example, Palestine, Guam, and Hong Kong are all represented, and all three have varying and contentious histories with regard to their territorial status.

WORKS CITED

Conclusion


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