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What is political theory?

Chapter aims

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Consider definitions of 'comparative political theory' and 'global political theory' and compare them with other approaches to political theory.
- Understand the purpose and history of the field of political theory, including its connection to claims about 'Western civilization.'
- Consider how thematic connections and comparisons can be made across a wide variety of global texts and perspectives.
- Reflect on how best to use this textbook for your own interests.

Introduction

If countries fight each other so often, can humans ever act together to meet global challenges like climate change? Is there a way to justly distribute wealth and power? Do our governments ever truly represent the people they rule? These are some of the most important issues of our time—and they are the kind of questions that political theory asks. They are complex, daunting, and have no single or simple answers. While political theory cannot (and often does not) give precise instructions on how to solve pressing political problems, it can teach us to ask the right questions and to reject those that lead to dead ends. For instance, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there were worldwide rebellions against imperial rule. At that time, many political theorists took a step back to ask, 'When is violent resistance justified?' However, Mohandas Gandhi asked whether violence could ever defeat empire. This new question reframed the problem from the legitimacy of violence to the links between violence and unjust rule. It challenged the first question's presupposition that one can use violence without inadvertently bolstering domination. Hence political theory asks questions that assess and critique what happens in politics, and the answers (even if partial or incomplete) can guide people and communities toward their goals.

This book will study cases of how different people, across the world and at different times, have asked and answered questions about how to deal with their most important problems. Many issues that political theory studies have remained important for human communities over long stretches of time—such as when (if ever) war can be just, or what is a fair division of wealth in a society, or which social roles and conventions we should adopt to interact harmoniously with each other. Studying such issues can give you the tools to ask *your own* questions, the questions that matter most in your own circumstances.

But how is political theory practiced? Note first that the field of political theory revolves around questions and debates, rather than settled answers on which most people would agree. For example, one of the main questions that arises when we think about politics is, ‘Who has the right to rule in a community?’ This question is in turn connected to others like ‘Where does political community come from?’ or ‘Who gets to participate and who should be left out?’ As we answer such questions (see Chapter 3: ‘The Origins of Politics’ and Chapter 6: ‘Political Action’), we might connect them to existing practical problems, like the outcome of elections or the management of immigration rules. We also think of the shortcomings in the institutions that are tasked with dealing with those problems. None of those questions can be settled once and for all, and the connected, ongoing debates create our field of study.

For that reason, we approach political theory as a field of study that asks questions, rather than one that provides information. It does so in order to understand political views, to assess ideas and the institutions that those ideas uphold, and also to set and appraise standards for guiding action. Notice that some of the work involved in political theorizing is finding facts and describing what goes on in the world. But that is not political theory’s main task. Our field overlaps with history, sociology, and other fields that describe reality, but its main role is not description. Instead, it diagnoses problems, and it sets standards for how to do things better. Political theory, then, is a field of study that offers a systematic reflection on political life, often for critical and normative purposes. ‘Normative’ means that political theory examines and defends claims about how things *should* be, not just about how things are. In that sense, its task is not primarily empirical; it does not consider questions of causality (‘what factors cause something to happen?’), but it does often consider how we come to accept certain explanations over others; what it is we take ourselves to be doing, seeing, and wanting in political life; and what kind of arguments or claims are implied in innocuous words or concepts. The ‘political’ part of political theory does not just refer to institutions often identified as political such as governments or parties, but also to any forms of power that might exist in personal, social, or international contexts. These forms of power might be manifest in forms of violence that come with war or conflict, but they may also be present in other areas such as racial discrimination, hierarchies within family life, or an unequal distribution of wealth, voice, or influence (see Chapter 4: ‘War and Violence’ and Chapter 8: ‘Equality and Hierarchy’). Political theory also helps us question the status quo by asking what is at stake when we accept ideas unthinkingly, and what alternatives might be available. In sum, there are many ways to practice political theory. (See Textbox 1.1: How to Study Political Theory?)

Textbox 1.1

How to study political theory?

In contemporary Political Science departments in English-speaking universities across the world, political theorists typically practice using one or a combination of the approaches below. As the examples show, these are differences in method, not in the subject matter; you can study the same subject from all these different perspectives. This list is not exhaustive: Comparative and Global Political Theory, as we discuss in this chapter, can be added to the list.

History of Political Thought studies past texts and ideas, often through reference to their historical context or sequential place in a canon. This can take the form of interpreting single texts of canonical thinkers or following the development of a concept across time.

For example: Tully, James. 1990. *A Discourse on Property: John Locke and His Adversaries*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Normative Political Thought crafts arguments to justify or explain how things ought to be in the political world. It typically uses reasons and arguments derived from first principles (such as natural rights, or justice and equality), and is also practiced in Philosophy departments.

For example: Simmons, John A. 1992. *The Lockean Theory of Rights*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Critical Theory formulates theories that seek to critique and transform society. It analyzes texts, ideologies, or norms, looking for internal contradictions and internal problems in existing structures of power. It often aims to dismantle existing oppressions through practical action.

For example: Nichols, Robert. 2020. *Theft is Property!: Dispossession and Critical Theory*. Chapel Hill: Duke University Press.

Postcolonial Theory points to a vast body of scholarship, particularly influential in the wider humanities disciplines, that reflects on the impact of European (and sometimes other kinds of) colonial rule across the world. It seeks to understand the world from the perspective of imperialist oppression, including how our contemporary forms of academic knowledge were produced to serve and justify European expansion.

For example: Bhandar, Brenna. 2018. *Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership*. Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press.

(Continued)

Ideology and Discourse Analysis describes the rules and conventions that determine political meanings in particular contexts. It studies how people communicate, assign value, and create meaning with others, and how this background knowledge is both the product of and the condition for politics.

For example: Howarth, David. 2010. 'Power, Discourse, and Policy: Articulating a Hegemony Approach to Critical Policy Studies.' *Critical Policy Studies*, 3(3–4): 309–335.

Why do we call our approach to the field 'global and comparative'? When we (the authors) first encountered political theory in universities in Mexico, Canada, and the United States, we were taught that the important problems studied in the field were 'perennial' and 'universal,' and that political theory studies the most important responses to these questions throughout history. However, the questions and examples guiding inquiry in political theory often centered on a very particular set of experiences emerging out of Western Europe and North America. For example, political theories of revolutions—which examine what they are and under what conditions they are justified—discussed thinkers from the American Revolutionary War and the French Revolution, but they skipped ideas from the Haitian Revolution and the Spanish American Independence Wars, which are part of the same historical wave. Moreover, when a fact or experience did not fit political theory's dominant frame, it could be dismissed as not 'real' political theory and categorized as something else, like literature, anthropology, or religion. A historical legal text such as *The Laws of Manu* (discussed in this textbook, in Chapter 9: 'Ritual') would be studied in Religious Studies or Asian History, rather than in a Law School or a Politics department.

In the last few decades, however, there has been a marked change. Many political theorists who entered the field alongside us have sought both to expand the range of examples and to find different experiences that were separate from the stories that Eurocentric political theory typically told (and which tended to eclipse those other kinds of stories). This work is revealing connections and differences in the approaches to political theory done outside Europe and North America, based on different kinds of historical and contemporary experiences. In this textbook, we resist a narrow framing of political theory, choosing to join the wider movement of scholars who are opening the field by looking at different theories comparatively, including globally relevant and interesting ideas that matter to broader audiences. With this textbook, we hope to demonstrate by our own example the value of a more global perspective.

This chapter begins that demonstration. The first section offers definitions of 'comparative political theory' and 'global political theory,' and tells us why they matter. Next, we explain the role of a global and comparative approach to political theory by distinguishing these expansive views of our subject matter from the narrow view that we often find in the history of the field. We ask why the narrow view of political theory arose as a thing to be studied in the first place, and who decided on its content? We highlight how, over

its century-long history, the field was often linked to so-called ‘Western civilization.’ The canon of texts that came to be identified as political theory—by authors such as Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, and Hobbes—was formulated in part to justify a Western, typically liberal, way of life, and to distinguish it from how others organized their political lives in other regions of the world. Interestingly, as liberal democracy faced new challenges over time, the canon of political theory changed too. Rather than serving as a transparent window into the nature of ‘Western’ life and thought, the political theory canon helped to construct an idea of the ‘West’ that was always unstable.

However, this narrow view of political theory can also modify itself. We invoke its critical spirit and show how even the narrow view can engage with texts, practices, and institutions using a global and comparative approach, which accepts that political life happens everywhere and ‘everywhen.’ We give examples from the broader approach and explain how we connect the themes that guide each chapter (such as ‘Property and Territory’ or ‘Great Texts’). We explain how we connect and compare using the metaphor of a #hashtag: these tags help us formulate more compelling questions, which break through the boundaries drawn around periods, geographic regions, religious commitments, or sets of texts that can be considered political theory. We conclude with some suggestions for how you might practice political theory in a global and comparative way.

Political theory: Some definitions to start our inquiry

Political theory is characterized by its pluralism of objectives and methods. That is, there are multiple ways of doing political theory, and scholars strive for many different goals when they do it. Given this diversity, it is hard to pin political theory down, but before we begin our discussion it is helpful to venture a definition for it. This section also offers definitions for ‘global’ and ‘comparative,’ which are terms we further justify later in the chapter. After reading this textbook, you may find you wish to contest our definitions. We encourage you to do it! As we explain below, political theory is always in motion and it changes as we practice it.

So, what is political theory? Political theory is perhaps best defined by what it does. **Political theory** *diagnoses problems in the rules, frameworks, and institutions that organize politics and it also critiques, interprets, and offers normative standards for the ideas, values, and practices that structure political life.* This definition is expansive, and can include many versions of political theory, but it also captures some important commonalities. Most political theorists ask questions that lie beneath immediate matters of policy or partisan politics. They ask questions such as: What is the origin of politics? Can wars be moral? How can we have a political order that respects equality? Our definition also incorporates the most common approaches to doing political theory, which include clarifying the meaning of ideas (now and in the past), interpreting texts and images, analyzing concepts, and/or assessing arguments from and about political actors (see Textbox 1.1). Although these are different ways of engaging the subject matter, they are all humanistic methods. ‘Humanistic’ means that they are focused on debates over interpretation and meaning (concerns which characterize most fields in the humanities) rather than claims about description or causes based on assumptions of law-like

generalizations and predictable outcomes (which are the concerns of most fields of the social sciences and natural sciences). This focus on the humanities can be surprising because our field is housed in political science where scholars tend to emphasize formal and quantitative work. Yet, the focus on the humanities fits better with the plurality of the field and its critical and normative approaches.

If we are concerned with the immediate aspects of ‘real politics,’ why do we turn to questions about meaning, rather than ostensibly more practical questions about the causes of political behavior? Why do we need political theory? Political theory provides us with the tools and content to consider how—and whether—political life could be *different* from how it appears to us right now. The questions ‘Could things be otherwise? And *should* they be?’ are at the core of the field. They allow us to transcend our current situation and think of other possibilities. This kind of process can be undertaken in many ways, such as by turning to stories and texts from the past which help political theorists think of what could be; or by using self-reflection, prompted by encounters with whatever might be different or unexpected. This encounter could be with a different point of view, an alternative interpretation of an event, or an unfamiliar concept or text. Political theorists might use these different kinds of resources to argue for change, to warn against observable trends in political life as they see it, and to think imaginatively about different kinds of futures for themselves and their communities. In doing so, they implicitly offer defenses for their answers, drawing from premises they hope their community will accept. In sum, political theory enables us to ask questions about how we might do things differently, and what those questions reveal about political possibilities for the present and future.

Although human beings have most likely always asked profound questions about politics and wondered about the origin of authority or the legitimacy of power, political theory as a field of study did not always exist. Political theory was brought into being in a specific context and historical moment, to serve particular kinds of ends. Much of its current practice reflects the relatively narrow focus of its early practitioners on a very limited set of experiences: largely European and North American. For example, one of the main problems in traditional political theory is about the distribution of private property. But private property as it is conceived in Europe has not existed in every society. So the setup of the problem cannot apply everywhere (see Chapter 7: ‘Property and Territory’). Yet, the questions that structure Eurocentric political theory are often described as ‘universal,’ suggesting that it is not necessary to look beyond them. But if we point out that politics does not always appear in the same way or form across time or space, neither should theories about what it should look like, what it should do, or how we as persons and communities might respond to it. We need global and comparative approaches to answer these more pressing questions.

What do we mean by global and comparative approaches? We say much more about these in the remainder of this chapter, and we offer many more examples in the rest of the book. Here we simply sketch out some definitions to guide your reading as you go further. A **global approach to political theory** *considers theories, ideologies, and normative views and practices from every historical and geographical context, including but going well beyond the spaces typically associated with Euro-America or ‘the West.’* (However, it cannot consider them all at the same time!) Notably, the ‘globality’ of these approaches is not merely a matter of geographic

representation—it is not simply a matter of adding some Indian or Thai ideas to the European basket. First, a global approach recognizes that there are worthy but neglected forms of political thinking that have existed even within the geographical area of Western Europe and North America. Such thinking includes, most prominently, the political ideas of indigenous peoples of North America. Although many are located in the geographic ‘West,’ their thinking has long been denied recognition as worthy of inclusion in political theory.

Second, we must recognize that communities we now associate with certain ideas have changed their composition and their location over time, sometimes quite dramatically. Certain formations of communities that exist today did not exist 200 years ago; this is true of many communities now calling themselves nation-states, which typically combined peoples of many different languages and cultures under a single national umbrella, and excluded others. Likewise, many kinds of communities and community formations have not persisted to the present day. Their ideas about politics now exist in fragmented or altered form, if at all. A key example of such communities are the great empires of the past (including their modes of political organization and thinking) which were frequently decimated by conquest or by colonial settlement. Take, for example, the Mughal Empire, whose institutions ended in great part due to the violent intervention of the British East India Company. Finally, the global approach may also concentrate on problems that concern everyone in the world, such as inequalities in worldwide commercial networks or climate change. But it notes that even in cases of shared problems, there exist many ways of framing and approaching those problems across time, place, and ideologies.

A **comparative approach to political theory** *considers differences and similarities among and between these views and practices, valuing the new insights that emerge when different perspectives are thought about together.* Global and comparative approaches need not work together, but in practice they often do: comparative approaches are used to bring global perspectives into conversation, as we will see in the chapters of this book. Used in this way, comparison can enable us to see new things that would otherwise not be apparent. For example, thinking about how pervasive and powerful ritual action could be for Confucius in the *Analects* enables us to better see and consider the value of ritualistic practices for us in our time and place. Likewise, when we juxtapose the *Analects* to the hierarchical social system defended by a text such as the *Laws of Manu*, we can gauge the role played by hierarchy in both while also noting how deeply Confucius neglects to take account of key social functions—including childbirth, household management, and food preparation. (Both of these examples are discussed in Chapter 9: ‘Ritual.’)

Another aspect of the comparative approach includes recognizing that many kinds of claims are often built on hidden comparisons with something else. This helps us realize just how much comparisons with other views or practices determine what we understand as ‘our’ point of view. A clear example: What we understand to be ‘home’ depends on what we are comparing it to—when we are overseas, our home might be our country; when we are visiting friends, it might be our residence; when we are on the other side of the country, home might be our state or province. In this way, the comparative approach does not simply assume that views or practices have given features that would be self-evident to everybody. It helps us escape the assumption that some things are ‘normal’ and others are lesser or defective in relation to them.

Our organization of this book reflects our commitment to global and comparative approaches. Given the way comparison lets us see things that we otherwise might not, and given our commitment to global perspectives that include communities across the world which change over time, we do not present a laundry list of discrete ideas supposedly emerging from particular geographic regions. Rather, we organize each chapter around a theme, so that we can consider the novel insights that emerge when we bring thinkers or perspectives across time and space together to contemplate this shared theme. The next sections of this chapter offer further explanation of how we might do political theory in a global and comparative way, to demonstrate how the ongoing conversation of political theory can be enriched through interaction with a broader diversity of experience.

What is political theory? A brief history of the academic field

Before we go on to explain why political theory requires a global and comparative approach, it is helpful to know where the field came from. Under what conditions, and for what purposes, does it make sense to pursue an academic field called political theory? As we will argue, the narrow Eurocentric version of political theory is not a matter of universal and perennial questions (as some of its practitioners liked to believe). It is in fact a relatively new invention: it dates to the late nineteenth century, when it arose as a counterpart to the novel discipline of what came to be known as ‘Political Science.’

To tell this story, the first thing to note is that, unlike other fields such as the natural sciences, or even political science, political theory is much more openly dependent on the thought of the past, even the ancient past. Political theorists engage with the past to give authority to their ideas, and not only as a source of historical information. Political theorists thus ‘stand on the shoulders of giants’ in more ways than one: they model themselves on the thinkers of the past, and they use these past ideas and questions as means for advancing their own thinking in the present. In part, this is because the field reflects on what communities value or believe they ought to value, how political institutions and other formations of power ought to be structured, and what we as humans do when we form communities. These are all products of unpredictable human interaction and interpretation. As such, they cannot be studied statistically or mathematically, as we might study atoms or structural engineering. Knowledge about such values, and training in the systematic reflections required to produce theories about them, is not a process that is necessarily cumulative over time: current or contemporary thinking is not necessarily better than past thinking for enabling these insights. Moreover, because it is so hard to agree on correct answers, old texts acquire a patina of authority from repeated engagement.

This is one reason why commentary on classic texts, particularly those of Plato and Aristotle, has played such a large role in political theory (see Chapter 2: ‘Great Texts’). Contemporary political theorists comment on, assess, or in some cases model themselves on the kind of inquiry on display in these texts, in what has been called more a ‘vocation’ than

a ‘method’ for doing political theory (Wolin 1969). Political theorists also take for granted the authority of some texts and authors such that they become the standard for understanding and evaluating political action in other times and places.

Given that the past and historical sources are so important to the field, the historical trajectory that it follows also becomes very important. Among traditional political theorists, it is common to say that political theory began with Plato, the ancient Athenian Greek political philosopher famous for writing dialogues featuring his teacher, Socrates. Yet these claims are deceptive. Plato may have modeled modes of thinking that, from the fourth century BCE on, would come to inform many different kinds of inquiry in philosophy, religion, and aesthetics. But he could not have known he was contributing to something called ‘political theory,’ because the concept and field of study did not exist until the late nineteenth century. Political theory arose in that time and place in response to needs that continue to mark its practice today.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, a growing capacity to *measure* social realities, and not only respond to or document them, began to challenge the methods and claims to truth from older disciplines. When disciplines such as philosophy made claims about the purpose of human community, these claims could not be evaluated by presenting measurable evidence. Around this time, scholars began to argue that a more scientific approach to human problems, which included taking account of how humans formed communities in the first place, could tell us more about democratic political systems than philosophy could. These empirical approaches often urged closer attention to measurable facts: they looked at current events and noted the extent to which social life created challenges for some groups while privileging others. As a result, many of these early empirical researchers advanced progressive social causes. But they also often failed to examine the premises or biases of their scholarly goals, including what it might mean to qualify as ‘democratic’ or why democracy alone should be the sole target of examination for students of politics.

Political theory emerged amid tensions between this measurement-based (sometimes called ‘positivist’) approach to political life and the purely moral one—exemplified by more abstract, sometimes socially disconnected conversations about what human community might be. Early political theorists were particularly invested in examining ‘the state,’ understood as a site through which a homogenous body of democratic citizens acted autonomously to express their will (Gunnell 2005). Perhaps not surprisingly, these conversations evolved alongside the emerging discipline of political science. As a ‘science’ of politics, this new discipline disavowed earlier historical or anecdotal approaches to political analysis based solely on the interpretation of experience. Instead, political science claimed for its practitioners a systematic, rigorous, and testable method for analyzing states, populations, and their behavior. Political theory thus existed, according to these early political science practitioners, to provide guidance about what kind of state formation or behavior could be ethically defended, or to give an authoritative story about facts that many practitioners considered obvious or inevitable (see Chapter 5: ‘The State and Its Alternatives’).

We can call this history an ‘external’ history: it tells a story about how political theory evolved from the perspective of professional historians who gather evidence about it after it happened. But people who identify as political theorists often tell a different kind of history

from 'within,' which identifies what it is they take themselves to be doing. These kinds of stories often justify political theory in different ways and see its practice as independently useful and important. In these internal histories, political theory is not merely a supplement to the work of political science but often stands as an autonomous discipline with its own purposes. Some of the most famous of these internal histories identify political theory as part of a human inquiry that stretches back millennia and that overlaps with a tightly bounded history of the West. This is what we call 'the narrow view' of political theory.

One of the earliest such defenses was written in 1937 by George Sabine, a political scientist at Cornell University who used the history of political theory to explain the rise of fascism in the twentieth century. He is among the first to claim that there are linear historical connections between certain ancient ideas and current beliefs. These claims would go largely unchallenged for almost another century:

Most modern political ideals—such, for example, as justice, liberty, constitutional government, and respect for the law—or at least the definitions of them, began with the reflection of Greek thinkers upon the institutions of the city-state. (Sabine 1937, 17)

Sabine is not alone in these views. Many different writers echo his belief that ancient Greece is a uniquely privileged source of modern political thinking, including the key questions of politics, which have been modified but not fundamentally changed over time. The German émigré Leo Strauss, and the eminent postwar political theorist Sheldon Wolin, made similar claims a few decades later. The point is not that ancient Greece or Greek thinkers provide direct blueprints for modern politics. Sabine, Wolin, and others have long acknowledged that the problems of the past are never identical to the problems we face in the present. Their point is rather that a careful study of the political thinking of these ancients, and their later interpreters in the modern world including such thinkers as Niccolò Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and the American 'Founding Fathers,' is crucial for comprehending how we got to where we supposedly find ourselves today and where we ought to go next. According to the narrow view of political theory, these key thinkers bequeathed key sets of terms and concerns through which we continue to parse the dilemmas of political life, so it would behoove us to study these ideas carefully—or so this story goes. Some political theorists even go so far as to see political theory as guided by a set of core questions that recur throughout human experience with politics; they claim that the reason political theory studies the texts and thinkers that it does is because they engage these recurring or perennial problems most rigorously.

According to these stories, the concepts and concerns we use today to think and worry about politics have their origin in one place: ancient Greece. They culminate in one primary set of concerns: how to secure and expand the liberal principles of freedom, justice, and human rights that were consolidated after World War II as a response to the rise of fascism in Europe. These purposes, so often assumed rather than explicitly defended in much teaching and research in political theory, are why an introduction to political theory is often called by its critics a survey 'from Plato to NATO.' The North Atlantic Treaty Organization is the international agreement that brought together the United States and the countries of

Northern and Western Europe to enable their shared protection from communist countries after World War II. For many, the agreement is emblematic of fundamental cultural and political similarities that unite Europeans and North Americans and distinguish them from dangerous ‘others’—such as the communist countries of Eastern Europe and Asia, Third-World revolutionaries, and so-called Islamic theocracies.

In this narrow conception of the field, only those authors and polities that are central to this story count as ‘political theory.’ The political experiences, thought, and practices of everyone else are classified as mythology, literature, or religion—the study of which is to be undertaken by anthropologists or historians, perhaps, but not political theorists. This is because the linear story of political theory is seen as leading inexorably toward liberal democracy and its values of secularism (the division of church and state) and scientific thinking, which are then claimed as distinctive products of Western civilization. The narrow version of political theory shores up this history of the West, helping to create it as a geographic and cultural space in which a distinctively modern, liberal, and democratic way of life takes shape—such that alternative questions, methods, and concerns in other parts of the world do not fit into the story. As a result, they also lose their place in the history of political theory as a field of study. This is why the rich classical scholarship that emerged over centuries in East Asia is undertaken in area studies departments, rather than studied alongside Plato and Aristotle; and also why the political and legal thought of Islam is studied in literature, area studies, or religious studies departments rather than law schools (we discuss these cases in Chapter 2: ‘Great Texts’).

Why do we need a global and comparative approach to political theory?

As may already be obvious to you, there are many problems with this narrow conception of political theory. On a very basic level, it papers over the internal diversity and disagreement within whatever it claims to be ‘Western.’ There are many such examples, starting with the slave-owning, aristocratic society of ancient Greece. This distinctive cultural milieu bears little obvious similarity to modern life, or indeed to any of the subsequent array of ‘Western’ thinkers chosen for inclusion in this canon. The monarchic Britain of Thomas Hobbes, or the Tuscan city-states of Machiavelli’s times, likewise have little in common with each other, besides their inclusion in a list of names put together by later scholars such as Sabine. All of them participated in conversations much broader than the singular, linear one supposedly culminating in modern liberal democratic states. Indeed, most of the thinkers in this narrow canon were not liberals or democrats to begin with. They advocated for other kinds of political projects and goals, some of which had little to do with the values of freedom and self-determination that formed part of the twentieth-century NATO consensus. Thomas Hobbes most famously argued for the return of an authoritarian monarchy to subdue the opinions of the masses, and Machiavelli gave advice to princes about how to use fear and love to rule their polities. These examples show that even ‘inside’ the geographic regions of

Western Europe and North America, much more was happening than this simple story might claim.

The most important thing this narrow conception of political theory leaves out, however, is what was happening in the rest of the world. While ‘Western’ political theorists were busy writing about the political happenings that concerned them, people around the world continued to think and argue about politics too (see Figure 1.1). The Nahuatl people of the New World were forging a theory of the political community that attached people to a given land (see Chapter 5: ‘The State and Its Alternatives’); Wang Yangming was formulating a new theory of human morality that took account of a spontaneous moral instinct common to all humans (see Chapter 6: ‘Political Action’); and al-Shaybani was arguing that the spoils of war had to be used for public betterment (see Chapter 4: ‘War and Violence’). The narrow Plato-to-NATO story of political theory not only ignores those powerful contributions; it claims they are not activities meaningfully called ‘political theory.’

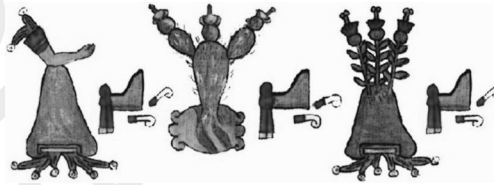


Figure 1.1 Politics everywhere and everywhen: Glyphs for the city-states of the triple alliance of the Aztec Empire: Texcoco, Mexico, and Tacuba (Codex Osuna).

These contributions from outside of Europe and America are sometimes claimed by political theorists to be doing something different from political theory, and therefore irrelevant to it. Like most other forms of human thought, these contributions existed within a specific context, and many of them would not claim to be doing something called ‘political theory.’ But importantly, the same is true for all the thinkers in the Western canon as well—they were also engaged in activities that today we would call poetry, sociology, or theology. Earlier in this chapter, we defined political theory as a field of study which diagnoses problems in the rules, frameworks, and institutions that organize politics, and it also critiques, interprets, and offers normative standards for the sets of ideas that structure political action. Political theory acknowledges the importance of the contexts from which ideas emerged, but affirms also that ideas about politics can ‘speak beyond’ their time and place. So it would be very odd to claim that only the brains of largely male persons in a very tiny geographical region of the world were capable of examining such questions or of offering insights that are not confined to the time and place of their emergence.

In this textbook, we therefore argue that political theorizing is happening outside as well as within whatever set of texts the field is preoccupied with at the moment, and that problems occur in different ways across time. There is no reason to assume that the only people who have ever had a rigorous or insightful view of politics are a small group of ‘dead white men.’ If we ignore other contributions that emerged across different spaces and times, we fail to acknowledge them as equal, and in doing so we denigrate the ways of life that prompted

their reflection. We would deny them our attention, prior even to examining their content, simply because of who articulated them or where they came from. Just as importantly, we risk losing out on the important insights they offer about politics, constructing instead an insular, unrepresentative, and fairly biased view of human possibility.

Many of the first people to start questioning why political theory should be limited to Euro-America were anticolonial thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In places such as Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and South Asia, ‘anticolonial,’ ‘postcolonial’ or ‘decolonial’ thinkers articulated the value of their own theoretical heritages and practices for thinking about contemporary dilemmas of politics. For example, the Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu (see Chapter 6: ‘Political Action’) thought rigorously about how Ashanti practices of consensus, which continued to exist informally even against competition from Western-style party democracy, could achieve dynamic forms of compromise across social and political groups. These postcolonial critics were among the first to recognize that political theory did more than simply ignore non-Western thinkers and experience: it also helped to create the very idea of ‘the West’ by excluding everyone else’s political experiences and smoothing over the disagreements in its own putative tradition. These critics instead showed how their own experiences with politics, and traditions of thinking about it, could and did give rise to new possibilities for their communities and those of others (Césaire [1956] 2010). As a result, these critics challenged the view that only Westerners are capable of doing what we have, in this chapter, defined political theorists to be doing.

These powerful postcolonial critiques were taken up in many different fields, but academic political theory was among the last to recognize their value. They did not receive much formal institutional attention in political science or political theory until globalization in the 1990s, when people, businesses, money, and ideas began circulating at a rapidly increasing rate. These circulations accompanied both destructive clashes and productive cultural and political innovations. At this point, it became impossible to ignore how different modes of political practice and thought influenced each other, and how important it was to understand them in a world that was now undeniably multicultural. Political theory evolved a number of different approaches to handle these questions, most prominently ‘comparative political theory’ (Jenco et al. 2020). As defined by one of its original proponents, Roxanne Euben, comparative political theory ‘introduces non-Western perspectives into familiar debates about the problems of living together’ (Euben 1997, 32). The idea is not simply to keep adding more and more ‘stuff’ to the box that is political theory. Rather, bringing these perspectives on board will force us to think differently about *all* the stuff—and about the box.

Political theory is thus constantly transformed through these comparative and global engagements, becoming something new and different each time. One motivation for this textbook is to take forward this work and to show its direct benefits to our thinking. We also argue that political theory cannot be done otherwise, or it would risk excluding valuable approaches to political thought and practice that can speak to a broader range of concerns.

We undertake the ‘how’ in the next section. For right now, let us briefly summarize the ‘what’ (What is political theory?) and the ‘why’ (Why do we need a global and comparative approach to political theory?). We saw above that political theory diagnoses problems and critiques, interprets, and offers normative standards for the rules and values that organize

political life. Although political theory in this wider sense is an activity undertaken in many different kinds of human communities across time and place, its lineage has often been defined in terms of a set of questions or texts that began with Plato in ancient Greece. We argued, however, that political theory need not, and should not, remain confined to some narrow list of core problems or texts defined by the 'Western' version of political theory. We showed that political theory's potential for critical and insightful interventions in political thinking is better served by considering a much larger range of questions, relevant to thinkers and texts across a wider set of times and spaces.

Nevertheless, we should connect these questions, texts, and experiences to explore them with greater rigor and clarity. To do so, we use a thematic approach that encourages comparisons, and sometimes unexpected connections, between disparate experiences and texts. In what follows we explain how to do comparison and how to make connections in political theory. We also explain the themes we use to make our own comparisons and connections in the chapters of this textbook.

How to use this book: Making connections and comparisons

Looking through the table of contents, you will quickly realize that this book is not organized around the geographic regions you might expect from a book on 'comparative' or 'global' thought. The very word 'global' seems to imply a world's fair of ideas—broad encounters between traditions, religions, or cultures that are supposed to be representative of broader communities or regions. We do something different here. The organization of this textbook demonstrates a new method of doing political theory, based on connection and comparison rather than the study of some pre-given set of texts, ideas, or geographical regions. In this section, we explain this method and we go on to suggest how it might be used by you, the reader, to both comprehend and challenge what we, the authors, have done.

This textbook views political theory through a series of curated themes, used as the title of each chapter, to bring together ideas and voices across time and space into a shared thread. Although the range of possible themes for a truly global study of political thought is arguably infinite, we have chosen themes which we believe can open up new lines of debate, even as they speak to concerns arising in a wide variety of global settings. These themes inevitably reflect the particular contexts and expertise of their authors, but they are not random. They reflect matters of ongoing concern within political theory (in chapters on topics such as 'Property and Territory,' 'The Origins of Politics,' and 'Equality and Hierarchy') even as they also make the case for new and heretofore unexamined connections among sites of political thought and action, which sometimes feature more prominently outside the liberal Western mainstream rather than within in it (such as in Chapter 9: 'Ritual'). For example, many large cities around the world are facing a housing crisis, causing widespread political concern. This problem is not obviously connected to the hunting practices of people in pre-colonial North

America. But the current political problem *is* connected to indigenous dispossession through the idea of private property. Reflecting on private property in different times and places, including the alternative relationships to land and property it displaced, can give us ideas for asking new questions in our own circumstances. So, we use these themes to organize diverse voices that speak to and sometimes against them, and in the process raise new questions. The final chapter, 'Gender, Race, and Colonialism,' gathers *three* important and inter-related themes, which appear in different ways throughout nearly every chapter of the book, and traces the insights that emerge when we consider them alongside each other.

These themes bring together authors and texts that are not usually compared, so that new concepts and questions can be formed. In this way, they operate much like hashtags in social media. Hashtags are themes or phrases that organize groups in open-ended ways, so that they can come together but also move apart, like flocks of birds (to borrow a metaphor from political theorist William Connolly). These groups might come about spontaneously without prior direction, design, or leadership, when different people start to make arguments for why they should be connected through a shared theme. This means that like other such flocks, the hashtags (or the themes) invite self-creating and open-ended juxtapositions: ideas, texts, and perspectives are placed alongside each other, in ways that are mutually illuminating (see Figure 1.2). Our hashtags provide an infrastructure that enables connections to happen, to be contested, and to be remade. They are therefore future-oriented, even as they attempt to collect some of what has already been said and done about these themes (see Connections 1.1: Hashtags).



Figure 1.2 Flocks of birds. Like flocks of birds, a hashtag can give coherence to a group of ideas without a prior direction, design, or leadership.

Connections 1.1

Hashtags

Hashtags were invented by Chris Messina of Twitter (now X). He chose the hash as a symbol to enable ‘contextualization, content filtering and exploratory serendipity’ in ad hoc groups (Messina 2007). In this book, we consider the topics for each chapter a bit like a hashtag. Each chapter topic brings together various thinkers, texts, and ideas under a single theme for critical consideration and comparison. But the chapters in this textbook are only the start, not the end, of the discussion: we encourage you to ‘tag’ other ideas, texts, and experiences with the same theme so as to bring these into consideration as well. In terms of the method of political theory, these tags are a device that we hope facilitates broader discussions of wider relevance, to different kinds of people and groups, rather than relying on already-established lines of thinking or lineages of thought.

In the chapters, we are always careful to note that claims of similarity and difference about particular texts or ideas do not capture their given, pre-existing features; rather, we hold that these similarities and differences can only come into view when we juxtapose those ideas. In a similar fashion, themes enable new connections to mainstream political theory to be drawn, but they also enable questions about *disconnection*: where and why do certain ideas *not* appear in the places we might expect them? A good example can be found in Chapter 9: ‘Ritual’: normally people who study liberal institutions do not think of ritual, and those who study ritual do not search for examples in modern secular states. However, the hashtag model allows us to retrieve connections to our own context—tagging, perhaps, the modern rituals of greeting, in which ‘how are you?’ signals not a request for information but functions as a means of social connection. We can also better see dissonances, such as the failure to understand how our practices of displaying flags or singing anthems are themselves forms of ritual action that indicate broader political connections beyond the sum of their discrete actions or parts.

Our focus on connections and disconnections around particular themes—such as ‘Ritual’ or ‘Hierarchy’—rather than on traditions or single thinkers has several constructive contributions. First, it avoids sweeping generalizations about complex histories and societies (such as ‘Chinese thought’ or ‘Islamic knowledge’). No one society or lineage of thought or body of thinking could possibly be reduced to any single idea or intellectual figure. These are modes of thought, often spread across huge geographic regions and many centuries, that are quite dynamic and sophisticated. They are, moreover, permeable: they absorb and transform new ideas all the time rather than remaining static and sealed off from the rest of the world. In recognition of this, we try to avoid simply providing one thinker or idea to ‘stand in’ for particular worldviews. In this book, we offer more targeted, sensitive renderings of what political thinkers, activists, and texts have said and done, recognizing how the contexts of their time and place play a role in their thinking but without reducing their thought to a

mere representation of a cultural worldview. We try to strike a balance between acknowledging the complexity of the time and space in which they made their intervention and presenting them as having the potential to speak beyond that context.

This potential to ‘speak beyond’ is, in fact, one of the main features of theories. A **theory** is an idea or claim that is generalized to speak to another context or set of conditions (Jenco 2016). For example, we do not have to live in Athens in the fourth century BCE in order to understand that Plato in *The Republic* sees justice as a virtue which applies both to individuals and to the city those individuals inhabit. We can comprehend what he means, and we can apply and debate this claim in our time and place. We do, however, have to understand something of the context in which Plato wrote—such as that he wrote in and for a slave-holding society that excluded slaves and women from participating in government—to comprehend why his proposals for women to act as guardians of the best city alongside men are so radical, and to consider what this radical proposition might mean for his understanding of the just city.

Historically, as we explained above, only Euro-American texts and people have been ascribed this ability to ‘speak beyond,’ which means that only *they* have enjoyed the capacity to make theory that could apply in other times and places. This belief underlies the persistent view that political theory should simply be comprised of a key set of Western texts, starting (usually) with Plato. In this book, we change the terms of this game by insisting that all people have this potential to speak beyond the contexts of their emergence. Gathering these ideas, texts, and thinkers under the theme of each chapter allows us to situate them in a shared conversation, allowing each to throw light on the other.

Second, and relatedly, a thematic, connective approach shifts attention away from fruitless debates that link an idea or perspective to ‘where it comes from.’ We focus instead on ‘what it means.’ We use the theme of each chapter to invite discussion about what the *juxtaposition* of different texts, debates, and contexts might reveal. We do not mean to showcase simply the ‘Muslim view of X,’ or the ‘indigenous perspective on Y,’ as though these ideas are simply items in a catalogue of unrelated objects. Rather, we hope to show that bringing them together reveals something that could not be seen when taking each in isolation. In doing so, we mimic more closely the way political ideas and practices have actually been deployed throughout time by political actors and theorists, in moments where their ideas crystallize and refract. For example, when the Indian jurist, economist, and dalit (lower caste) intellectual leader B. R. Ambedkar reads democratic theory alongside the restrictive caste system outlined in the *Laws of Manu* (see Chapter 9: ‘Ritual’), he comes to realize the degree to which caste distinctions inhibit the formation of spontaneous fraternal relations between groups and individuals. What emerges from his thought is derivable neither from the *Laws of Manu* nor from democratic theory: it is instead something new that emerges between them.

In this textbook, the thematic approach can also foster comparison and connection among ideas and texts, without requiring any prior historical contact between them. In Chapter 6: ‘Political Action,’ for example, we juxtapose the views of Mohandas Gandhi, writing in the twentieth century in India, with those of Wang Yangming, writing 400 years earlier and on another part of the continent. Obviously the two never met, nor did the ideas of one influence those of the other. But they do throw light on each other and are connected

by their shared project of political action: both defended methods by which individuals could be effective in taking unilateral action on the basis of their social connections to others in their community.

Finally, our approach makes the practice of global political theory more open ended, by allowing themes to emerge from different sites and temporal periods without restriction. Themes can evolve through their application to new cases, or through the contribution of new voices. They can also be interpreted differently by readers than by their authors—leading to a divergence from their initial purposes. We embrace this open-ended possibility. Our thematic approach thus denies the power of canonical political theory to define conversations about what political life should look like and how it should be discussed. This is why we include here themes that have not yet featured in mainstream political theory, such as ritual (which is not usually a topic considered outside anthropological or religious circles); as well as treatments of themes that interrogate how they are typically understood (such as just war theory, in Chapter 4: ‘War and Violence’). Our point in using themes here is to undermine the lineages of thinking that have long held control of conversations in political theory, while mobilizing interest around other compelling nodes of thought and action. Thematic connections can help us avoid reproducing existing ways of organizing knowledge, which are often governed by expectations that the historical or philosophical development of Europe will be automatically mimicked elsewhere (Nappi 2017).

So, where to go from here? We have explained how we have undertaken a global and comparative approach to political theory. But how can *you* do it? Each chapter offers a model of how we, as authors writing from particular times and places, have situated a range of perspectives on important themes and showed how this juxtaposition enables us to see things we otherwise would not be able to. In each chapter, a single theme groups together a range of possibilities across human time and space, and invites further reflection on how these possibilities compare, contrast, or extend to include additional juxtapositions. And, as you examine the timeline included in this book, you’ll see that there are further ways of arranging connections and comparisons: some might cluster events, texts, or groups around different eras or regions. Many of the people and events we discuss are from the eighteenth century onward, but we could have chosen other times. You could choose other events, and as a result your timeline and its scale would look different. This is part of our invitation to you to study the people, events, and ideas we mention and explore those in the centuries that occupy less space in our timeline of people, texts, and events. In that spirit, each chapter offers a series of questions for you, the reader, to take these connections further, inviting you to juxtapose your own experiences or ideas alongside ours. These exercises both deepen understanding of the content of each chapter and also encourage you to inhabit the method we use: you as a reader become a producer of political theory rather than its consumer. *Your* ideas, too, can ‘speak beyond’ the context in which you find yourself, and you can stage conversations with texts and figures across time and space. We invite precisely such an open-ended engagement with these chapters and their themes, to enable a truly global and comparative approach to political theory.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we examined political theory as an idea and as a practice. We narrated a brief history of the field—showing how it was not an inevitable outgrowth of postwar liberal democracy, but rather a response to a specific set of problems that shored up an archetypical (and simplistic) ideal of ‘the West.’ Noting the problems with these idealizations, we offered a global and comparative approach to political theory, to take account of these otherwise excluded reflections. We explained how a global political theory might be used and what its benefits might be. Clustering reflections on political life around open-ended themes portrays political theory as a multi-vocal activity, taking place over diverse sites and time periods, whose connections and disconnections can yield insight into the world we inhabit. Political theory is not a purely normative or universal activity, but nor can its findings be confined to one domain or space of thinking. Accordingly, we do not construct a ‘Chinese tradition’ or ‘Islamic tradition’ to consider alongside a ‘Western tradition.’ Rather, we hope to explore more diverse normative perspectives and provide more varied conceptual resources, recognizing political thinking and reflection as an activity that has been done in many different ways, across space and time.

Questions for discussion and self-reflection

- 1 What is political theory, and where might we find it? Can you identify some places, perhaps in your own life or reading, where you have encountered something like political theory?
- 2 Why is political theory typically seen as a practice that emerges from ancient Greece? Why is this view problematic?
- 3 How might comparison be understood as doing more than just listing similarities and differences? How might comparison create connections, and help us to see things in a new way?
- 4 What does a global approach to political theory hope to include? What does this look like in practice?

Further reading

This curated reading list offers some starting points for thinking about the disciplinary history of political theory, as well as some scholarly work that challenges the narrow view of political theory. Some of these works have been cited in our discussion above.

Césaire, Aimé. [1956] 2010. ‘Culture and Colonization.’ *Social Text*, 28 (2): 127–144.
<https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-2009-071>.

In this speech, translated from the French, the Martinican postcolonial theorist Aimé Césaire offers a future-looking glimpse of how African cultural and political thinking might be reconstructed after its decimation by European colonial rule.

Euben, Roxanne L. 1997. 'Comparative Political Theory: An Islamic Fundamentalist Critique of Rationalism.' *The Journal of Politics*, 59 (1): 28–55. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2998214>.

This foundational work by Roxanne Euben invented the term comparative political theory, and explained how the approach could transform our conversations about key terms of politics. In this case, she examines how a comparative political theory examining the work of Islamic fundamentalist Sayyid Qutb could offer new insight into modern theories of state sovereignty.

Jenco, Leigh K.. 2016. 'On the Possibility of Chinese Thought as Global Theory.' In *Chinese Thought as Global Theory: Deparochializing Knowledge Production in the Social Sciences and Humanities*, edited by Leigh K. Jenco, 1–25. Albany: SUNY Press.

Jenco, Leigh K., Murad Idris, and Megan C. Thomas. 2020. 'Comparison, Connectivity, and Disconnection.' In *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Political Theory*, edited by Leigh K. Jenco, Murad Idris, and Megan C. Thomas, 1–16. New York: Oxford University Press.

This introduction to the first-ever handbook in comparative political theory offers an overview of scholarly work in this field, sketches its connections to cognate disciplines including international relations and area studies, and offers a new way of thinking about comparison as productive of new theories.

Messina, Chris. 2007. 'Groups for Twitter; or A Proposal for Twitter Tag Channels.' *Factory Joe* (blog), 26 August. <https://factoryjoe.com/2007/08/25/groups-for-twitter-or-a-proposal-for-twitter-tag-channels/>.

In this blog post, Chris Messina—inventor of the hashtag—shows how tags can be used to create open-ended groups of people, themes, or ideas.

Nappi, Carla. 2017. 'Paying Attention: Early Modern Science Beyond Genealogy.' *Journal of Early Modern History*, 21 (5): 459–470. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700658-12342571>.

Sabine, George H. 1937. *A History of Political Theory*. London: George G. Harrap and Co. Ltd. <http://archive.org/details/dli.ernet.260180>.

Sabine's history is one of the first to consolidate knowledge about what political theory is, by arranging his discussion of texts in a chronology that runs from the ancient Greeks to modern European fascism. Although considered dated today, it does offer a glimpse into the early history of political theory which has now come under criticism for its narrow approach.