

Special Issue on *Comparative Political Theory*: Introductory Note by the Editor

In Summer 2006 the editors of *The Review of Politics* issued a call for papers in the newly emerging field of comparative political theory. We did so for two reasons. First, we were impressed by the breadth and depth in which the perennial questions of political philosophy were explored in a comparative context—historical as well as cultural and geographical—in some of our recent submissions. Second, we wanted to recognize *the contributions of one of our long-time associate editors*, Fred Dallmayr, not only to *The Review* but also to diversifying and deepening the study of politics more generally. Both the editors and Professor Dallmayr are extremely gratified by the response.

We would particularly like to thank Jürgen Gebhardt, Antony Black, Anthony Parel, Takashi Shogimen, and Richard Bernstein for their contributions to this issue. Their essays illustrate the extraordinarily deep philosophical and historical learning as well as broad and varied linguistic competency required to do comparative political theory. Major contributors to the newly emerging subfield themselves, they have all shared the editors' desire to honor Fred Dallmayr.

Foreword

Fred Dallmayr

I greatly appreciate the honor involved in introducing this collection of papers. For more than two decades I have indeed been involved in this comparative theoretical endeavor. However, I must state right away that I am neither the birthmother nor the only midwife: my own thinking and the field at large have greatly benefited from the work of such colleagues and friends as Charles Taylor, Bhikhu Parekh, Anthony Parel, Charles Butterworth, and Hwa Yol Jung—to mention just a few. (Other names can readily be culled from the papers in this issue.) In my own case, the turn to midwifery can be dated with some precision: it occurred in 1984 when I attended a conference in India. The conference was organized by Bhikhu Parekh who then was Vice Chancellor of the University of Baroda. It was there that I discovered my deplorable “Eurocentrism.” Although I had studied at excellent places in Europe and America, I had never encountered (for instance) the name of Shankara—who occupies a role in the Indian tradition comparable to that of Thomas Aquinas in the West. For the next two

decades I traveled to India on a nearly annual basis. I studied Sanskrit in order to be able to savor classical texts. In India I also encountered Buddhism—which later led me to travels in the Far East. And in India I also found a large community of Muslims—an experience which later guided me on trips to the Near East and North Africa.

I mention these experiences to indicate that rupturing Eurocentrism is not a quick or instantaneous process. Moving across boundaries, beyond familiar terrains, often involves a sustained labor, a possibly painful transformation of thought habits and even ways of life. There is another side to this story. In opposition to extreme deconstructionists, I hold that border-crossing does not presuppose or entail cultural amnesia, a forgetting of one's own traditions. Although they may be critically put to the test, cultural traditions are also important "pre-judgments" without which learning would not happen. Here, of course, the crucial role of hermeneutics enters the picture.

Moving beyond the level of personal experience, let me reflect briefly on the broader historical and political context which has enabled something like comparative political theory to emerge. Here it is important to recall a few crucial events which opened up a space for the new inquiry. On top of the list is the demise of the Soviet Empire in 1989 which terminated a scenario where the entire global arena was dominated by the competition of two comprehensive ideologies, liberalism and communism—ideologies which both were equally opposed to nuanced cultural or civilizational distinctions. After all, both liberalism and communism are the outgrowth of Western "modernity" with its bent toward radical "universalism." (There was something called the "Third World" during this period, but it was peripheral and largely neglected.) With the demise of this totalizing dichotomy, new perspectives or paradigms of thought were liberated or unleashed, a movement which gave rise to such initiatives as multiculturalism, identity politics, post-colonial and gender studies and even (what Gilles Kepel called) the "revenge of God." This upsurge was aided and abetted by a host of new intellectual and philosophical currents, like postmodernism, deconstruction, neo-Nietzscheanism, and neo-pragmatism.

To be sure, in some quarters, all these changes were nothing but fashionable trends—what Stanley Fish has called "boutique multiculturalism." However, for many others it was a serious intellectual and academic challenge, requiring quite a bit of professional retooling, traveling to distant places, studying unfamiliar texts and ways of life. Those who have shouldered any of these labors know that this is not just a fad, not simply delight in the exotic knick-knacks of a boutique. As noted before, what is involved is a struggle: a struggle against Eurocentrism and more broadly against "Orientalism," against some deeply ingrained hegemonic leanings and against certain taken-for-granted presuppositions of Western culture and metaphysics.

The seriousness of the stakes involved in cross-cultural encounters was driven home to many observers barely a few years after the collapse of the Soviet Union: via the publication in 1993 of Samuel Huntington's article

“The Clash of Civilizations?” The merit of Huntington’s essay was that it shifted the focus of global analysis from the Westphalian paradigm of nation-states to the “fault lines” existing between cultures and civilizations. The downside of his article was that he treated civilizations on a par with traditional, monolithic nation-states—and thus neglected precisely what is most valuable about cultures and civilizations: the fact that they are storehouses of accumulated learning and have the ongoing capacity to learn afresh and transform themselves in the light of new experiences.

For many of us who acted as midwives of the emerging endeavor—and certainly for me—a basic motivation animating the pursuit of comparative political theory was precisely to prove Huntington wrong. We did not rule out the possibility of cultural clashes or conflicts, but we rejected the “self-fulfilling prophecy” looming in his thesis. In lieu of the Huntingtonian scenario we wanted to put the emphasis on cross-cultural encounters, on mutual learning, on “dialogue among civilizations.” It so happens that a few years later, in 1999, the Iranian President Khatami proposed the idea of such a dialogue in a speech to the General Assembly of the United Nations; and the General Assembly took up the idea and proceeded to designate 2001 as the “Year of the Dialogue Among Civilizations.” (As a sideline, I might add that 1999 was also in a way the formal beginning of comparative political theory. In that year, the publisher of Lexington Books authorized the launching a new book series titled *Global Encounters: Studies in Comparative Political Theory*. I became the series editor and also the editor of the first volume, *Border Crossings*. In the eight years since the launching of the series, some sixteen volumes have been published.)

To be sure, neither President Khatami nor anyone else was under the illusion that clashes between civilizations could be prevented and cross-cultural learning be fostered by merely pinning a label to a year or by inaugurating a new book series. How little this is the case was demonstrated dramatically later in 2001 when September 11 unleashed upon the world a new paroxysm of violence and terror wars.

We are still living today under the impact of 2001. This also goes for us as practitioners of comparative political theory—an academic enterprise which by now has achieved the status of a “Working Group” within the confines of the American Political Science Association (and has attracted and continues to attract a sizeable number of junior colleagues). I think all of us who participate in this venture are faced with a choice: Do we wish to exacerbate global conflicts and intensify “fault lines” or looming clashes? Or do we want to contribute, as much as we can, to mutual learning, better understanding, and a reduction of the dangers of violent destruction facing humankind today? This choice brings into view the ethical dimension of the new field.

I realize that comparative political theory can be undertaken for many different reasons. Some of these motives may be strictly pragmatic or utilitarian and guided by self-interest (such as interest in economic benefits or academic advancement). However, there is another, more important dimension. According to an old adage, the basic purpose of politics is to

promote the “common good” or the “good life.” This was the teaching of Aristotle; but it is also central to the teachings of Alfarabi, Confucius, and the Indian shastras. Now, I believe that political theory participates reflectively in politics. This means that political theory is not only *about* politics (where the theory could be quite disengaged from its subject matter). Rather, it is a “*political*” theory in the sense that the theory itself is political—not in a narrowly partisan or ideological sense but in the sense of contributing or not contributing to the fostering of the “public good” or the “good life.” Political theory, in my view, cannot be neutral on this issue; it is always, for good or ill, related to this basic issue.

Hence, for us as political theorists, the question is always: what is the import of our theorizing for politics understood in this manner? And as practitioners of comparative political theory (CPT), the basic question for us has to be: how does our theorizing contribute to, or else detract from, the global public good or the promotion of cross-cultural good life: that is, a life dedicated to global justice, mutual recognition, and (as much as possible) to non-violence and peace?

Pursuit of such a general trajectory does not in any way mean the endorsement of uniform global marching orders or ideological blueprints. On the contrary, precisely the plurality or diversity of cultures and civilizations requires respect for a strong pluralism of cross-cultural approaches. Seen from this angle, comparative political theory is not a new methodology or disciplinary straitjacket, but only a loose ethical bond linking together people willing to participate in the broad “conversation of humankind” (where no one has the final word). The present special issue of the *Review* admirably illustrates this pluralism. The authors of the different essays all deal with quite specific topics, exploring important facets of political theory both cross-culturally and cross-temporally. It would be counterproductive for me to try to fit their essays into a neat scheme or tight system. Instead, I want to thank each of them for their willingness to contribute “without banisters” to this special issue and thus to add their voices to the ongoing and hopefully expanding “conversation” both within academia and beyond.