

Work in Progress do not cite without author's written permission.

## **Doing Political Theory in a Globalized World: Some Theoretical and Methodological Concerns**

Hassan Bashir, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor – Political Science  
Liberal Arts Program  
Texas A&M University at Qatar  
[hassan.bashir@qatar.tamu.edu](mailto:hassan.bashir@qatar.tamu.edu)

(Prepared for the SGIR 7th Pan-European International Relations Conference -  
September 9-11, 2010, Stockholm, Sweden)

## **Doing Political Theory in a Globalized World: Some Theoretical and Methodological Concerns**

This paper is part of a larger project where I analyze reasons given by some of the leading political theorists in North America to start a new subfield of political theory in the form of Comparative or Cosmopolitan Political Theory (CPT). Key arguments by these comparative theorists (or comparativists) suggest that analyses of systems of ideas developed in the non-west reveal that there is “humanly significant knowledge outside the western canon.”<sup>1</sup> CPT, in this context, is the proposed new subfield based on the notion that “political theory may have started in western civilization but is not coterminous with it.”<sup>2</sup>

I support both these notions but there are also some significant differences between what one can call mainstream works of CPT and my own work. The most fundamental of these differences pertain to the manner in which usefulness and necessity for CPT has been envisaged till now. Where almost all comparativists seem to agree that CPT is useful in the context of the current wave of globalization, I attempt to demonstrate that comparative theorizing must be adopted because ideas about the Self are often shaped as a result of encounters with the Other. So my approach basically attempts to push the comparative endeavor from a peripheral disciplinary existence to the center of the vocational landscape of traditional political theory in western universities.

Such an orientation, in my opinion, also necessitates an argument for a different methodological approach towards doing CPT. For example, most works of CPT assume that the west has a decided advantage over its others in a globalized world. This requires

---

<sup>1</sup> Euben (1999) p.10

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

these theorists to first methodologically neutralize this assumed civilizational power disparity and then attempt comparative theorizing via construction of imaginary dialogues between the works of the representatives of the west and its Others. I test the validity of this methodological claim by looking at records of actual encounters between the east and the west during the pre-enlightenment period when the west was not the most dominant civilization in the world. These records confirm the significant influence of ideas espoused by the eastern Other in the shaping of the western Self, but do not provide evidence for a major role played by power inequalities between participants in inter-civilizational dialogues. The stories of these encounters suggest that notions of western self-superiority and self-righteousness not only persevered but perhaps grew even stronger in the face of powerful opponents. In fact, in instances where the Europeans made accommodations to a foreign culture, these were based on their faith in the superiority of Christian doctrine and were allowed only with a clear understanding that an accommodative approach will eventually help Europeans in evangelizing their hosts.<sup>3</sup>

It is important to mention here that one must, without a doubt, include the impact of forces of globalization as a key factor in any description of the world and the human condition in the late modern period. But to interpret globalization in terms of facilitating the west in maintaining its political or ideological influence over the rest of the world is probably an overstatement. After all, it is in the age of globalization that events such as the terrorist attacks by radical religious fundamentalists on the US mainland and in Europe even became a possibility. Without the advanced networks of travel and communication such attacks could neither be planned nor executed. In a recent article,

---

<sup>3</sup> For example the Jesuit accommodation method practiced by Mateo Ricci and his associates in early modern China.

which discusses implications of globalization for the United States and the west, Fareed Zakria writes

In 2006-2007, 124 countries grew their economies at over 4 percent a year.... Over the last two decades, lands outside the industrialized West have been growing at rates that were once unthinkable... the overall trend has been unambiguously upward. ... A list of 25 companies most likely to be the world's next great multinationals ... [includes] four companies each from Brazil, Mexico, South Korea and Taiwan; three from India, two from China, and one each from Argentina, Chile, Malaysia, and South Africa. This is much broader than the much-ballyhooed rise of China or even Asia. It is the rise of the rest – the rest of the world.<sup>4</sup>

These estimates show that forces of globalization have provided CPT's supposedly disadvantaged non-west with the tools to equal the west in economic terms at least. Hence an argument for CPT that is based on the centrality of globalization is clearly overstated. Furthermore, this approach also limits the content of this new subfield of political theory to a period where the existence of globalization becomes a prior condition for political theorizing itself. Globalization, in my opinion, is significant in the late modern period only because of its role as a catalyst and as an agent for broadening the theoretical horizons of the west and convincing traditional political theorists to recognize the inevitability of including non-western systems of ideas into any discourse which claims to find universally applicable/ acceptable solutions pertaining to the dilemmas faced by human beings in general. It is also important to remember here that catalysts only speed up ongoing processes and, as such, lack the ability to generate independent reactions of their own. I argue that contacts with the east provided new data to the west about the world and its inhabitants and have forced western observers to reassess and adjust their self-understanding accordingly in the light of this new information.

Furthermore, because of the technologically advanced character of the globalized world,

---

<sup>4</sup> Zakria (2008) p.23

we now have greater means and stronger reasons to test existing theories and come up with new ones. Just as our medieval and early modern predecessors did in the cases that I discuss later.

Even if we were to ignore doubts raised till now regarding the centrality of globalization to CPT, the popular methodological and theoretical approaches adopted by comparativists do not fully resolve their basic objection to traditional political theory that it creates a western monopoly over the *political* due to its sole reliance on western canonical texts. I feel that an attempt to counter this situation via an argument based on the unprecedented nature and impact of processes of globalization in the late modern period eventually results in strengthening this notion of a western monopoly. This is to say that the non-west becomes relevant only as a result of a process, i.e., globalization, which is initiated by the west. West's interest in its Other in the late modern period, in this context, is because of certain unexpected outcomes of the process which was meant to perpetuate western monopoly over the rest of the world. Hence, it is the above stated facts about globalization that now require that the west must understand the source and logic of ideas originating in the non-west in order to maintain its supremacy. This possibility is also referred to by Dallmayr, who is the most ardent advocate of CPT in the west. In one of his recent pieces, he writes,

It is surely advantageous for ourselves, for the pursuit of our concrete self-interest, if we know more about the world and the people we are dealing or have to contend with. This is particularly true in our shrinking or globalizing world today—a world exhibiting a great diversity of cultural, philosophical, and religious traditions. As long as we are mired in ignorance or blinded by coarse prejudices, we are likely to go astray or to encounter roadblocks which can frustrate or obstruct the unhampered pursuit of our interests and preferences.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Dallmayr (2009) p. 18.

To be fair to Dallmayr he issues the above statement with an eye on avoiding conflicts in a world where inter-civilizational contact is absolutely unavoidable.<sup>6</sup> The question that he ignores, and one which should intrigue political theorists in the west, however, is: why would inter-civilizational conflict necessarily be the outcome of an increased frequency of contact? Dallmayr frames his response to this question in terms of western rationalism and the notion that human beings often act because of selfish motives. Therefore among other reasons he suggests that western political theorists must gain better understanding of non-western systems of ideas because it is in their own self-interest.<sup>7</sup> Dallmayr's argument raises two problems: first, how is his approach different from Huntington's approach, which predicts a clash of civilizations as an inevitable outcome of the increased interplay between forces of globalization?<sup>8</sup> And second that it runs the risk of relegating non-western ideas to a position where their usefulness is assessed primarily in context of their utility for the west. The fact is (as repeatedly demonstrated by Dallmayr and other comparativists) that non-western systems of ideas have intrinsic value of their own and are based on foundations similar to those found in the experience of the west. Furthermore, it is ideas from a foreign civilization which are often responsible for honing, if not formulating, the self-understanding of civilizations. I argue that this influence is almost unavoidable and does not carry any requirement for an

---

<sup>6</sup> Dallmayr argues that in the worst of possible scenarios, such ignorance can lead to violent backlashes, to culture clashes or "clashes of civilizations," and even to self-destruction. Ibid. pp.18-19

<sup>7</sup> Dallmayr discusses the usefulness of CPT in terms of a progression of "good" or "goods". He terms self-interest as the primary, "pragmatic-utilitarian" good which is readily understandable at a common sense level and argues that the next levels of this progression are a higher-self (*atman*) and no-self (*anatta*). In addition, at this highest level the Other is also transformed from a target for acquisition to a richly differentiated persona. It is at this level where Dallmayr suggests that a genuine dialogue of mutual learning can take place. There are several other implications of Dallmayr's argument which I have discussed elsewhere. Briefly I use the examples of global Jihad and the global environment movements and argue that from the point of view of an ethical transformation if "self" converts to "no-self" there is an equal possibility that the other turns into a true enemy with very little possibility of any dialogue. Ibid. pp.20-1

<sup>8</sup> In one of his earlier pieces Dallmayr has argued that his approach is different from other approaches to inter-civilizational contacts namely Edward Said's Orientalism and Huntington's Clash of Civilizations.

ultimate “fusion of horizons.” Inter-civilizational encounters, as Erich Leed correctly states, belong to the category of cross-cultural contacts “which generate a new kind of self consciousness, a species of collective self-awareness.”<sup>9</sup> In this context and writing about European travel writing, Leed argues that

from the sixteenth century on, Europeans encountered with increasing frequency a world of contrastive ethnicities, which allowed them to make comparisons between themselves and others. Out of these comparisons arose a self image of a culture no longer merely the heir of ancient traditions, a periphery of ancient centers, but a center in its own right and a culmination of history on the cutting edge of the “modern.”<sup>10</sup>

Even though Leed is only interested in writing a history of travel, a phenomenon which he thinks is a central force in causing historical transformations, he, nevertheless, ends up supporting the notion of CPT presented in this paper by claiming that comparison is central to any understanding the nature of the Self.<sup>11</sup> Arguments regarding creation of the Self in contradistinction to knowledge of the Other have been made by other notable scholars too. For instance, Todorov, in his classic study of the European encounter with the New World, describes the significance of his work by stating,

It [his work] permits us to reflect upon ourselves, to discover resemblances as well as differences: once again self-knowledge develops through knowledge of the Other.<sup>12</sup>

I believe that Todorov’s study of the discovery of the New World by Europeans is of unique significance for CPT. As I discuss elsewhere in most cases of inter-civilizational contact in the pre modern period the Europeans had some degree of prior information about the land and peoples they were visiting. For instance in case of China,

---

<sup>9</sup> In support of this description Leed cites Thucydides’ account of the Greeks who became aware of their collective self identity only after they had to unite against the Persians (1991) p.20

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p.21

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p.18

<sup>12</sup> Todorov (1999) p.254

which was generally closed to the foreigners, Jesuits had received considerable information from the Japanese. Detailed descriptions of the Chinese can be found in the letters sent by early Jesuits back to Europe.<sup>13</sup> Similarly awareness and the urge to gain better understanding about the Mongols was a result of their successful military campaigns against Muslims and against the west itself. Contacts in this context most probably, as Dallmayr suggests, were initiated from a utilitarian perspective and were in pure European self-interest. In addition, given that European representatives in all these cases were missionaries who had come to the east with the primary objective of evangelization, it is logical to suggest that the main frame of reference for the Europeans was religion. As we have seen, European religious motivations, on the one hand developed certain expectations about the east and its inhabitants, whereas, on the other hand, these guided the interpretation of unfamiliar customs encountered in foreign lands. For example, regardless of the differences in time and locale, we find that European Christian missionaries automatically chose Muslims in eastern lands as their prime opponents.

The rivalry between Islam and Christendom could be of prime importance in a milieu where the encounter was between Muslims and Christians only. In the encounters mentioned above, the missionaries, by making Muslim-Christian rivalry the issue of prime importance, totally missed the socio-political or even religious context of the eastern lands which they were visiting. Emperor Akbar of India, for instance, couldn't care less about the supremacy of Islam over other faiths, as confirmed even by the visiting Jesuits.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the Mongols also did not care about this issue at all as long as

---

<sup>13</sup> See for instance several of Francis Xavier's letters in (1992) pp.334, 341-2, 347-48, 382, 384

<sup>14</sup> See Jesuit letters in Correia-Afonso (1980) pp. 44-7, 51, 57, 59-60.

the adherents of all religions did not bear ill will toward their Mongol masters.<sup>15</sup> But as history tells us, Akbar's contempt for Islam and Mongol indifference to religion were interpreted as a hopeful sign for spreading Christianity in India in the first case and as an absolutely hopeless pursuit, by William of Rubruck, in the later instance. This assessment of the east reflects on how these European visitors understood themselves, i.e., they measured the goodness or the badness of the Other in terms of their distance from successful future conversion to the Christian faith, which was the primary component of their own self identity and from which they could not disassociate themselves in order to make any realistic assessment of what they experienced in the east. In cases like Jesuits in China, where Muslims were absent from the scene, the missionaries had to invoke their secular learning as the defining element of the European civilization in order to engage in a dialogue with Chinese scholars. But even in this case the focus on secular rather than the religious elements in the dialogue was justified to the Society superiors in Europe as necessary for successful future conversion of the Chinese people to Christianity.

Contacts with the east were also instrumental in enhancing European geographical horizons. As R. W. Southern argues, it was contacts with the Mongols that enlightened the Europeans about the enormity of the size of non-Christian world. He writes,

By the middle of the thirteenth century . . .it was seen that this picture [European estimates of population ratio of non-Christians to Christians] was far too optimistic. There were ten, or possibly a hundred, unbelievers for every Christian. Nobody knew: and the estimate grew with access of knowledge.<sup>16</sup>

According to Southern, an immediate impact of this new information on European self-understanding was a change in attitude toward the Crusades, which either seemed almost

---

<sup>15</sup> See For instance Boyle (1997) p. 26, Spuler (1968), pp. 39-41, and Dawson (1955) p. 85

<sup>16</sup> Southern (1962) p.43

impossible or at least in need of serious reassessment in terms of their aims as well as methods.<sup>17</sup> This reemphasizes Leed's and Todorov's argument that it is contacts with the Other which are responsible for shaping our collective self-awareness.

In light of the above, then, traditional political theory which does not pay heed to the notions of the *political* envisaged outside the boundaries of the west is by definition a limited enterprise. This is to say that traditional political theorists' exclusive reliance on the western canon enables them only to understand and analyze the internal dynamics of their own civilization. If it is true, as Leed and Todorov argue, that the content of the western canon may itself have been profoundly shaped by west's contact with its others, then to talk of a western civilization or a western identity in such circumstances automatically requires the understanding of that which westerners have excluded from any description of the self and termed "non-western." A comparative perspective, therefore, helps us in understanding the nature and basis of a built-in civilizational criterion against which the degree of civility and humanness of the Other is measured by different civilizations. For example, a look at the civilizational traits of early modern China reveals that all foreigners were barbarians as far as the Chinese were concerned. Similarly, all foreigners were acceptable to the Mongols as long as they were willing to submit to the supremacy of their Mongol masters. But perhaps the most telling of the cases, in this regard, is that of Mughal India where Abul Fazl and Akbar forged the concept of an Indian civilization whose most outstanding characteristic was diversity in terms of its people, terrain, languages, and customs. In other words, Abul Fazl used the very existence of diversity as the unique distinguishing, and hence unifying,

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

characteristic of India.<sup>18</sup> The ideology that he devised to legitimize this diverse entity was the notion of perpetual peace or *sulh-i-kul*. This ideology, to use Todorov's term, demanded a distributive rather than an assimilationist approach because of its cross-religious or cross-cultural outlook.<sup>19</sup> In terms of the built-in scale for valuing civilizations, then, Indian civilization's greatness lay in its ability to absorb diversity and make it its own. As a consequence of this approach the greatness of civilizations which boasted of their unity of faith was automatically suspect from an Indian point of view.

The Mongols, the Chinese, the Jesuits, the Europeans, and the Mughals were all aware of their Others to some degree. And as the frequency of European contact with the east increased, it forced representatives of the encountering civilizations to make presentations of what their respective civilizations stood for. Admittedly, it was mostly the visitors who had to make this presentation in order to acquire acceptance and favorable space in foreign lands. But, as the cases mentioned above suggest, both, the foreigners in order to make these presentations, and the hosts, in making a favorable or otherwise decision about the ideas presented, were required to achieve a certain degree of Alterity in order to communicate with each other. In my opinion, therefore, it is the formulation and presentation of arguments by members of different civilizations in this state of Alterity which should be central to the CPT enterprise. Primarily because prior to this stage the Other is theoretically irrelevant. It is also only in a state of Alterity that a simultaneous need arises to gain insight into foreign ideas, on the one hand, and to formulate and present those which define the Self, on the other. In this process, the peculiarities which a culture or civilization has internalized, and which do not seem

---

<sup>18</sup> See Allami (1993) ch. 1, bk. 3, pp.7-10

<sup>19</sup> Todorov uses the terms "distributive" and "assimilationist" to characterize Las Casas's approach towards the American Indians. For details see. *op.cit.*, pp. 190-1

questionable to its members anymore, come up for questioning by those who neither know nor care about their logic and significance. Many of these internalized concepts can be the basis of a civilization's confidence in its own superiority over its others. So, in a manner of speaking, then, it is only in a state of Alterity that "leaps of faith" are exposed to questioning by both the self and the Other.

A classic example of the above can be seen in Matteo Ricci's decision to hide the significance of Christ's crucifixion and passion for Christian faith from his hosts and to present instead the portrait of baby Christ and Madonna which, resulted in the Chinese misunderstanding that the Christians believed in a female God. Ricci was accurate in his assessment of the Chinese mind, which is also confirmed by the episode where a eunuch from the royal palace discovered the figure of Christ on Cross in Ricci's belongings and interpreted it as evidence that the Jesuits were involved in dark magic.<sup>20</sup> Ricci's decision to hide the crucifixion could only have been made in a state of Alterity which enabled him to understand how the Chinese would respond to the doctrines of Christian faith. But even more important is the fact that Ricci, a Jesuit missionary aiming to Christianize China, chose to compromise on one of the fundamental tenets of his faith in order to start a dialogue with the Chinese. Ricci's life in China is filled with several similar examples.

In addition to above examples, and as I stated earlier in this paper, it is also useful to consider briefly here some aspects of the impact of the discovery of the New World on European self-understanding. The most striking characteristic of the encounter between Europe and the New World, in context of this paper at least, is the impact that the absence of a Europe-like system of ideas among Amerindians had on European understanding of the Other in general and on their own civilization's role in a global

---

<sup>20</sup> Ricci (1953) pp.365-6

context in particular. For example, on the first day after making landfall in the New World Columbus noted in his diary that

the [Indians] should be good and intelligent servants, for I see that they say very quickly everything that is said to them; and I believe that they would become Christians very easily, for it seemed to me that they had no religion. Our Lord pleasing, at the time of my departure I will take six of them from here to Your Highnesses in order that they may learn to speak. No animal of any kind did I see on this island except parrots.<sup>21</sup>

It is noteworthy, according to Columbus, that the Indians have no religion and that they cannot speak. Furthermore, Columbus states that he wants to take the Indians to Europe in order to teach them how to speak rather than teaching them European language/s. The act of speaking refers to a unique human characteristic and Columbus's choice of words suggests that he considered these naked natives of the New World as something less than human.<sup>22</sup> As to the notion that Indians did not have any religion, Columbus notes at several places that when the natives saw the Europeans they repeatedly raised their hands towards the sky, thanked god, and believed that the visitors had come from the heavens.<sup>23</sup> The fact that the Indians believed that Europeans were visitors from heaven, as Columbus himself states, shows that they had some sort of a system of religious beliefs. Similarly, the fact that the Indians were able to answer Columbus's questions, with signs and actions, suggests that they could communicate like humans and did not know the language of the visitors.<sup>24</sup> Columbus's reading of the Amerindians, however, suggests that their nakedness and lack of civilizational elements, comparable to Europe's

---

<sup>21</sup> Columbus (1989) pp.68-9 hereinafter referred as *Diario*

<sup>22</sup> Todorov also affirms this see *op.cit.*, p. 30

<sup>23</sup> *Diario*, Pp. 73, 75.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

traditional others, made them an “Entirely Other” for early Europeans visitors.<sup>25</sup> This category of the Other is described by Haidu in following terms

In context of Occidental philosophy the “Entirely Other” designates a substance (in the Aristotelian sense) simultaneously irreducible to the substance of the enunciator and unknowable precisely because of the radical difference between the two substances. God and man are so different that man cannot formulate a positive discourse regarding the other substance.<sup>26</sup>

This unique nature of contact with the New World, in the context of the cases mentioned earlier, can also be affirmed via comparison with William of Rubruck’s experience in Mongol lands. As I discuss elsewhere, William noted that when he went among the Mongols, he felt as if had entered a new world. However, the presence of Nestorian Christians and Muslims at the Mongol Khan’s court allowed him to place these Others into an intelligible frame of reference and, on a civilizational scale of sorts, allowed him to communicate his observations in understandable terms to his intended audience in Europe. The facts that Rubruck actually had the opportunity to prove in a debate that Christianity was the only true faith, that he failed to convince the Mongols to allow him to stay in their lands and preach his faith, and his eventual desire that if it was in his power he would constantly preach war against the Mongols, present a picture where the attempts to engage with and convert the Other have failed and resulted in absolute disillusionment. In case of Columbus, on the other hand, the inhabitants of the New World are actually no more significant than his interest in the flora and fauna and natural resources such as gold. For example, in the passage quoted above, the characteristics of the inhabitants of the New World seem to be only as important as

---

<sup>25</sup> Todorov’s discussion of Columbus’s attitude towards the Amerindians in the immediate aftermath of the discovery also supports the claim for the Indians being an “Entirely Other” for the Europeans. See *op.cit.*, pp. 42-50

<sup>26</sup> Haidu (1990) p.683

informing the Europeans about the kind of animals that are found there. Furthermore, the observation that Indians quickly learn to repeat things in a European language was interpreted as a sign that they would make good servants and also quickly accept Christianity. In other words, without explicitly saying so, Columbus relegated the Indians to a sub-human status because of his inability to converse with them or to relate to their condition.

Scholars also seem to be in agreement that the discovery of the New World encouraged Columbus to view himself as playing an important role in the unfolding and fulfilling of Christian prophecies and resulted in consequent depictions of the New World as the Garden of Eden or the fabled east. This again proves that the status of an “Entirely Other” was assigned to the inhabitants of the New World by early European visitors.<sup>27</sup> However, a more significant point to consider here is that while radical differences between Amerindians and Europeans placed these people uniquely beyond the grasp of Columbus’s intelligence, they nevertheless caused the Europeans to reflect on their own role in context of this newly discovered reality. This highlights the centrality of Self-Other encounters in the broadening of one’s knowledge about one’s larger environment, on the one hand, and reasserts the notion that the Other has a formative influence in determining how we understand ourselves, on the other hand. Even though a detailed discussion of European attitude and policies towards the inhabitants of the New World is not exactly within the scope of this paper it maybe useful to go in a little more detail about the manner in which the discovery of the New World eventually forced the

---

<sup>27</sup> Among many others see Campbell (1988) pp. 165-209; Todorov (1999) pp.14-33; Pagden (1991) pp. 148-151; Watts (1985) pp. 73-102 and Leed, *op.cit.*, pp. 161-162

Europeans to reflect on their self-understanding and on the canonical texts which formed the basis of their identity.

Robert Paine argues that the European dilemma in the context of the discovery of the New World was twofold. First, “a new continent had to be added to the *Orbis Terrarum*,” however, because of “first principles of the sacred cosmography it had to be ontologically ‘the same’ as the other continents.”<sup>28</sup> And second, the Amerindians had to be placed within the existing framework of European knowledge. These aspects pushed the Europeans towards “fighting on two fronts – of living by the canon and of breaking loose from it.”<sup>29</sup> Paine’s description of a canon, in this context, and its alternate could also be very enlightening for CPT. Building on Baehr and O’Brien’s notion that “a *canon* exists as a totality – exclusive, unalterable, and impregnable to the possibility of critique,”<sup>30</sup> he argues that

As the Truth, a canon must not be tempered with; but how is the Truth to be understood, even as the world around it changes? So there will be commentaries, but always in accord with the founding precepts of the canon – beyond them lies the abyss of heresy.<sup>31</sup>

In the above context, then, CPT’s endeavor to include non-western texts into the theoretical discourse of the west and the suggestion of some comparativists to develop a non-western canon seems problematic right from the beginning. This is to say that only those non-western texts could be acceptable to western political theorists that are either already in agreement with or in contradistinction to the founding precepts of the western civilization and the rest should be rejected as irrelevant. The development of a non-western canon under such conditions will automatically be governed by the rules that

---

<sup>28</sup> Paine (1995) pp.49-50

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p.51

<sup>30</sup> Baehr and O’Brien (1994) cited in Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid

shape the western canon, so the original dissatisfaction voiced by comparative theorists, that the west seems to have a monopoly over the *political*, will remain intact.

Furthermore, the task of CPT in this context is limited, by definition, to finding similarities between disparate civilizations, again because radically different non-western texts must be rejected as irrelevant if the sanctity of canons is insisted upon. As a result even if CPT is successful in developing a non-western canon, it could only be an image of its western counterpart and may not reflect fully the complexity of non-western systems of ideas.

Furthermore, the very emphasis on keeping the western canon intact and creating a counter non-western canon in order to do comparative theorizing reveals the distinct and limiting characteristic of political theory as a western vocation, especially in the face of globalization which is characterized by comparativists as an unprecedented condition. Gellner, for example, suggests that during transportation from theology to cultural studies the need for canonicity is the dominant characteristic of societies which lack “a sense-of-theoretical-alternative.”<sup>32</sup> CPT in such a characterization of civilizational attitudes can either be the provider of a theoretical alternative to traditional political theory or it can perpetuate the primacy of canons for political theorizing and hence produce understandings that are essentially western in orientation and are already being produced by traditional political theory.

This paper argues that the task for CPT should be to explore the possibility of non-western influences on the development of the western canon, hence challenging the truth claims embedded in the very notion of canonicity itself. The paper also suggests that CPT’s focus on identifying non-western texts for the sole purpose of comparison via

---

<sup>32</sup> Gellner (1973) p.164

recourse to imaginary dialogues is problematic precisely because such an approach fails to satisfactorily resolve the dilemmas because of which the call for a new subfield was issued by Fred Dallmayr in the first place. I have discussed these issues elsewhere in detail, however, I think it is worthwhile to highlight one major claim, or more specifically a key methodological guideline, suggested for CPT by its founders, i.e., the quest to understand non-western ideas as they are understood by non-westerners themselves.

Here once again the European experience in the New World comes in handy, especially in Las Casas's writings, which provide an interesting source to comprehend some key issues related to understanding the Other in terms of its self-understanding while staying rooted in the canonical teachings of one's own civilization. As stated earlier, discovery of the New World, as a case to discuss methodological aspects of CPT, is particularly useful because of the "Entirely Other" nature of the Amerindians accorded to them by the Europeans. In this regard, Pagden points out that Las Casas's ideas regarding the rights of the Indians and the Indians' unassailably human status were based in the language of neo-Thomism.<sup>33</sup> And Las Casas's main task, in pleading the case of the Indians, was to demonstrate that it was his reading of the canon that was "the only true one" because he had "been there."<sup>34</sup> If Pagden's analysis of Las Casas's writings is true, then for CPT the noteworthy point here is that the western canon needed to be reinterpreted if the Amerindians were to have a place in the experience and history of the west. As Pagden states,

Only an interpretation of the canonical texts, that the "cruel and implacable enemies of the Indians" had used against them, could secure

---

<sup>33</sup> Pagden, *op.cit.*, p. 151

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

the human status of the Indians before a community for whom exegesis was the only access to knowledge.<sup>35</sup>

Las Casas's defense of the Indians, then, had a twofold significance in terms of European self-understanding. On the one hand, it introduced the notion that Europeans in the New World were perhaps behaving in a so called non-western or a non-Christian manner towards the Indians.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, Las Casas's arguments expanded the western canon in terms of its interpretive capability.<sup>37</sup>

It is noteworthy that the above understanding of Las Casas's work once again highlights the fact that even when the Europeans did not find any obvious similarities between themselves and their Others it caused self-reflection and redefinition of how the Europeans understood themselves. The European experience in the New World, therefore, suggests that CPT's task cannot be limited to seeking Voegelin-style equivalences between disparate civilizations as suggested by Anthony Parel. The Europeans in this instance had to reflect seriously upon and theoretically justify their treatment of and stance towards the New World and its inhabitants. The self-reflection, or even self-correction, in the light of new evidence, which was embedded in these theoretical positions towards the Amerindians, has been elaborated by several prominent political theorists in the west. For example, according to Pagden, it was the failure of Aristotle's theory of natural slavery to reconcile with the known facts about the social life of the Amerindians that led theologians like Francisco de Vitoria to recognize that there

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p.152

<sup>36</sup> See for instance Las Casas's comments on the profile of an ideal missionary and the only correct way to preach Christianity in Sullivan (1995) pp. 205-214.

<sup>37</sup> For Las Casas's description of categories of Barbarians and exclusion of Amerindians from the category called natural slaves by Aristotle see Las Casas (1993) pp. 123-7.

were inherent contradictions in the theory itself.<sup>38</sup> In the same vein, Todorov highlights the epistemological significance of the discovery of the New World and argues that this discovery was the cause whose effect was the beginning of the modern era, which rendered previous modes of making sense of reality essentially redundant.<sup>39</sup> Pagden affirms Todorov's position and highlights Las Casas's argument regarding "being there" as an essential condition for acquiring the ability to interpret reality.<sup>40</sup> Without the encounter between the "Entirely Other" Amerindians and representatives of the European civilization, such radical readjustments in European self-understanding as reflected in the European approach towards acquisition of knowledge would probably not have been possible.

The discovery of the New World, in comparison with other encounters mentioned in this paper, also raises the possibility that maybe the degree of strangeness of the Other is directly proportional to the intensity of the potential challenges to the manner in which one understands the Self. This is to say that as long as the Self has no knowledge of the Other, or the Other exists in a far removed state, there is no theoretical cost for the existing civilizational understanding of the Self and thereby the world. However, as the knowledge about the Other increases, primarily because of increased direct contact, theories of self-understanding automatically come under scrutiny. In this situation even if we choose to ignore the Other, we need to have a theoretical foundation for doing so.

Again as Pagden argues,

Observers in America, like observers of anything culturally unfamiliar for which there exist few identifiable antecedents, had to classify before they

---

<sup>38</sup> Pagden (1992) p.5

<sup>39</sup> Todorov, op.cit., p.5

<sup>40</sup> Pagden (1991) pp. 151-2

could properly see; and in order to do that they had no alternative but to appeal to a system which was already in use.<sup>41</sup>

Hence, as the frequency of European contact with the New World increased and each became a permanent fixture in the life-world of the Other, the weakness or the inadequacy of the existing system of ideas also became more visible and eventually required modification in the light of new facts.

Yet another significant episode for CPT in the story of early European experiences in the New World is the debate regarding the intellectual and religious capacity of the Amerindians between Las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda.<sup>42</sup> Las Casas and Sepúlveda held diametrically opposed views on Amerindians; however, as Lewis Hanke argues, the significance of this debate lies in the fact that it was the first time that a colonizing nation organized a formal inquiry into the justice of the methods used to extend its empire.<sup>43</sup> In addition, it was also the first time that an attempt was made to stigmatize an entire race as inferior and as born slaves.<sup>44</sup> Part of the argument on both sides of the debate was based on Aristotle's theory regarding the condition of natural slavery in some human groups. Aristotle framed his theory in context of the relationship between passion and reason and its impact on human behavior, arguing that groups in which passion ruled supreme were inferior by nature.<sup>45</sup> Consequently, Sepúlveda argued that the Amerindians were barbarians, who were governed by passion rather than reason, and therefore they were slaves by nature and the Spanish war against these people was

---

<sup>41</sup> Pagden (1992) p.4

<sup>42</sup> For a details account and commentary of this debate see Hanke (1974) pp.69-112

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. p.67

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. p xi

<sup>45</sup> For a discussion of Aristotle's theory in context of the New World see Pagden (1992) pp. 41-50

justified.<sup>46</sup> Las Casas responded to Sepulveda's argument by reassessing Aristotle's statements on barbarism, as a phenomenon, and showed that there were several kinds of barbarians and that the Indians did not fall into the category which Aristotle called natural slaves.<sup>47</sup> Building further on this claim, he also challenged Sepulveda's argument regarding the legality of Spanish war against the Indians.<sup>48</sup>

In defending the Indians, Las Casas also indirectly forced his audience to rethink several firmly established aspects of Christian identity. For instance, he brought up the issue of Church's jurisdiction over infidels and non believers in context of the natural law tradition and linked his arguments about treatment of the Amerindians to Christian relations with traditional Others. He argued that "Jews, Moslems and idolaters who do not live in Christian kingdom are not under the jurisdiction of the Church, nor any Christian prince, no matter how their crimes may violate natural law."<sup>49</sup> Once again, Las Casas's experience in the New World brought forward new data to challenge existing theories and approaches towards the Other, not just in the context of the New World, but also in terms of Christian understanding vis-à-vis the Other in a more general manner. It is noteworthy that Las Casas's key strategy in formulating all his arguments in defense of the Indians was to mix the American reality with familiar European theories. As mentioned earlier, this was the "being there" aspect of his reasoning, which Las Casas claimed was a necessary condition to gain any real understanding of the New World and its inhabitants.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> Hanke discusses Sepulveda's arguments in terms of Las Casas's responses see op.cit., pp. 83-88

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. pp. 83-4

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. pp.90-1

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. p. 88

<sup>50</sup> In his account of the destruction of the Indies Las Casas repeatedly invokes the eye witness nature of his account as the proof of its authenticity See Las Casas (1992) pp. 9,12,13, 15,16, 19, 23, 48. Also see Pagden who makes a similar claim (1991) p.151

The episode of the discovery of the New World and the subsequent European attitude towards its inhabitants has serious implications for the CPT endeavor. This intercivilizational encounter demonstrates that even a contact with an “Entirely Other,” especially if it is on a continued basis, can disturb existing understanding of the Self. Hence a methodological approach which insists on the continuation of a tradition, while acknowledging increased frequency of contacts with the Other, is unlikely to achieve a neutral dialogue between the Self and the Other. In context of CPT, this is most evident because of its heavy reliance on the model of Gadamarian philosophical hermeneutics. To quote Haidu,

In hermeneutics, subject and object are related by a key term: “tradition.”...[which] takes the shape of an uninterrupted dialogue... continuous from one text to another in the form of question and answer, each text producing an answer to the question asked... by an earlier text. The series of questions and answers constitutes the “tradition,” which becomes the condition of possibility of the cognitive relation between text and reader.<sup>51</sup>

Building further on the above description, Haidu argues that reliance on hermeneutics, then, invariably implies a conversation in which all involved have already agreed on the foundational significance of certain common codes. In this context, CPT’s practice of constructing imaginary dialogues between western and non-western texts and its attempt to identify a non-western canon while relying on philosophical hermeneutics with an aim to achieve a fusion of horizons does not appear to be a good strategy at all. This is because philosophical hermeneutics pushes one to understand a single tradition in terms of a continuous dialogue. If one wishes to introduce a foreign text into such a dialogue, then the text in question must first fulfill the criteria of providing a useful answer to the questions which have been raised by some earlier texts in a foreign

---

<sup>51</sup> Haidu, op.cit., pp. 672-3

tradition. In terms of east-west dialogue, then, eastern texts selected in this manner for inclusion into the western discourse are unlikely to present a nuanced picture of their indigenous tradition to a western reader. As a consequence, CPT's objective to understand the Other "as they understand themselves" is unlikely to be achieved if there is a heavy reliance on philosophical hermeneutics as the method of choice.

Furthermore, in order to be fair to non-western civilizations, CPT's quest to identify an alternate non-western canon must also be composed of texts that represent a continuous non-western tradition in shape of a dialogue consisting of important questions and answers which are significant in terms of the subject matter of political theory. In this context, the concern of primary significance, in my opinion, is not whether such a construction is possible or not. Instead it is the very notion that a non-western tradition virtually needs to be constructed first. And that too as one which mirrors our understanding of the western civilization. This situation is further complicated when comparativists insist that the purpose of comparisons must be a "fusion of horizons" between east and west. The problematic part of this scheme is that the choice of philosophical hermeneutics as a method has already pushed us in the direction of texts which are west-like in their orientation so that a fusion of horizons is in fact the predetermined outcome of the whole enterprise. And non-western texts in such a construction only serve the purpose of providing more data to support the answers already believed to be good in the west. As the cases discussed in this paper show, and as other critics of this approach in CPT have also argued, a fusion of horizons is not always the outcome of east-west encounters.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> See Nederman (2009) pp. 45-64

Yet another significant aspect that becomes evident from the examination of actual east-west encounters is that power disparity, while important, is not a major factor in determining how different civilizations understand themselves. In fact, as I suggest earlier, notions of self-superiority are maintained, if not strengthened, during a Self-Other encounter regardless of the power differential between the parties involved. Instead of power, the common factor in inter-civilizational encounters turns out to be the initiation of self-reflection. And this self-reflection, as we have seen, is often focused on maintaining a superior image of the self, regardless of whether one's civilization is at an advantage or a disadvantage in terms of power. CPT's focus on neutralizing west's advantage in the era of globalization misses what should be the central point of theoretical focus during an east-west meeting. The proof of this claim, i.e., initiation of self reflection as a result of Self-Other encounters, can best be seen once again in the case of the discovery of the New World, where even an encounter with an "Entirely Other" raised challenges for European self-understanding.

Using Haidu's terminology, then, one could say that the discovery of the other, at least in the cases mentioned in this paper, challenged not only the answers that the European civilization had provided itself, but also the questions which it thought were being raised by the very foundational texts themselves. Examples include reassessment of Aristotle's theory of natural slavery by Las Casas and Sepúlveda in face of the realities of western encounter with Amerindians, Muslim and Christian understandings of the Mongols as a punishment from God, and Ricci's reassessment of the Christian doctrine in his quest to find a place for Chinese practices related to Chinese ancestral rites by the literati in an attempt to create Chinese Christianity. The same is true of the Jesuit mission

to Akbar's court and Rubruck's journey to the Mongol lands, which, on the one hand, informed the west about the nature of Hindu and Buddhist faiths and, on the other hand, increased their awareness about the characteristics and size of non-Christian populations in the east, thus forcing the westerners to reassess their civilizational objectives and redefine the scope of their foundational texts. Furthermore, and at the very least, these examples force us to entertain the possibility of a strong role played by external elements in the development of European self-understanding.

The task of CPT, in light of the cases discussed in this essay, then, must be to identify and include the role played by elements external to a civilization in the development of the self-image of any given civilization. This approach also justifies the creation of a new subfield in the shape of CPT whose scope is defined by an exclusive focus on elements which are generally ignored by traditional political theorists. Focus on these ignored systems of ideas, without any bias for their geographical origins or historical position, promises to bring in new data for assessing self-images of various civilizations. These data would represent multiple civilizational standpoints on issues of common interest because of their origin in the instances of inter-civilizational interactions. Conceptualizing CPT from this vantage point will allow us to develop a more nuanced general understanding of the human condition in any given period and perhaps would permit us to propose more viable solutions to the dilemmas faced by us in a globalized world in particular.

## Bibliography

- Allami, Abul Fazl. (1993) *The Ain-i-Akbari: A Gazetteer and Administrative Manual of Akbar's Empire and Past History of India* 3 Vols. Vol. 1 trans. Blochmann H., vols. II and III trans. H.S. Jarrett. Edited by D.C. Phillott Calcutta: The Asiatic Society
- Baehr, P. & M.O'Brien (1994) "Founders, classics and the concept of a canon" *Current Sociology* Vol. 42, No.1. pp.105-126
- Boyle, J. A. (1997) *Genghis Khan: The History of the World Conqueror* by 'Ala-ad-Din 'Ata-Malik Juvaini translated from the text of Mizra Muhammad Qazvini Seattle: University of Washington Press
- Campbell, Mary B. (1988) *The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing, 400-1600* Ithaca: Cornell University Press
- Columbus, Christopher (1989) *The Diario of Christopher Columbus's First Voyage to America: Abstracted by Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas* transcribed and translated into English with notes and a concordance of the Spanish by Oliver Dunn and James E. Kelly Jr. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press
- Correia-Afonso, John S.J. ed. (1980) *Letters from the Mughal Court: The First Jesuit Mission to Akbar (1580-1583)* St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources
- Dallmayr, Fred (1989) *Margins of Political Discourse*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1996) *Beyond Orientalism: Essays on Cross-Cultural Political Encounter*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1998) *Alternative Visions: Paths in the Global Village*. Lanham, MD.: Roman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1999) *Border Crossings: Toward a Comparative Political Theory*. Maryland: Lexington Books.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2002) *Dialogue among Civilizations: Some Exemplary Voices*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2004) "Beyond Monologue: For a Comparative Political Theory". *Perspectives on Politics*. 2(2): 249-257.
- Dawson, Christopher (1955) *The Mongol Mission: Narratives and Letters of the Franciscan Missionaries in Mongolia and China in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries - Translated by a Nun of Stanbrook Abbey* New York: Sheed and Ward

- Euben, Roxanne (1999) *Enemy in the Mirror*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press
- Gellner, E. (1973) "The Savage and the Modern Mind" in Robin Horton and Ruth H. Finnegan, eds. *Modes of Thought: Essays on Thinking in Western and Non-Western Societies* London: Faber & Faber
- Haidu, Peter (1990) "The Semiotics of Alterity: A Comparison with Hermeneutics" *New Literary History*, Vol. 21, No. 3, New Historicisms, New Histories, and Others pp. 671-691
- Hanke, Lewis (1974) *All Mankind is One: A Study of the Disputation between Bartolomé de Las Casas and Juan Ginés Sepúlveda in 1550 on the Intellectual and Religious Capacity of the American Indians* Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press
- Las Casas, Bartolomé de (1992) *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* ed. and trans. by Nigel Griffin with an Introduction by Anthony Pagden UK: Penguin Books
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1993) *Witness: Writings of Bartolomé de Las Casas* ed. by George Sanderlin and foreword by Gustavo Gutiérrez New York: Orbis
- Leed, Eric J. (1991) *Mind of the Traveler: From Gilgamesh to Global Tourism* New York: Basic Books
- Nederman, Cary J. and Takashi Shogimen eds. (2009) *Western Political Thought in Dialogue with Asia* Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Paine, Robert (1995) "Columbus and Anthropology and the Unknown" *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* Vol.1, No.1 pp 47-65
- Pagden, Anthony (1991) "Ius et Factum: text Experience in the Writings of Bartolomé de Las Casas" *Representations* No.33, Special Issue: The New World pp. 147-162
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1992) *The Fall of Natural Man: The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology* New York: Cambridge University Press
- Ricci, Matteo (1953) *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Mathew Ricci: 1583-1610*. Translated from the Latin by Louis J. Gallagher, S.J. with a foreword by Richard J Cushing. New York: Random House
- Southern, Richard W. (1962) *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* Cambridge: Harvard University press
- Spuler, Bertold (1968) *History of the Mongols* translated from the German by Helga and Stuart Drummond, London: Dorset Press

Sullivan, Francis Patrick (1995) *Indian Freedom: The Cause of Bartolomé de Las Casas, 1484-1566: A Reader* Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward

Todorov, Tzvetan (1999) *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press

Watts, Pauline Moffitt (1985) "Prophecy and Discovery: On the Spiritual Origins of Christopher Columbus's "Enterprise of the Indies". *The American Historical Review* Vol. 90, No. 1. pp.73-102

Xavier, Francis (1992) *The Letters and Instructions of Francis Xavier* trans. M. Joseph Costelloe, S.J. St. Louis, Missouri: The Institute of Jesuit Sources

Zakria, Fareed (May 12<sup>th</sup> 2008) "The Rise of the Rest" *Newsweek* Vol. CLI. No. 19, New York: Newsweek Inc. pp. 20-29