

The Ethics of Comparativity

Comparative Political Theory and Indigenous Political Thought

Introduction

The purpose of this research is to outline how Indigenous political thought has been taken up in the field of political theory, and more specifically in the emerging sub field of comparative political theory. This survey of current research is not meant to be exhaustive, but will provide a look at some of the major moments of theorizing that have shaped this research area. I am focusing on Canadian political theory, as this is the context I am the most familiar with. This research also demonstrates issues around including Indigenous political thought in comparative political theory, and suggestions for how the field should move forward in order to address concerns of possible epistemic violence.

Positionality Statement

I am engaging in this research as a non-Indigenous person in the context of the settler colonial state of Canada. My engagement in this research is based on observing the limited nature of discussions on Indigenous political thought and seeking to uncover the factors that underpin this exclusion. This work is important for non-Indigenous researchers like myself who seek to engage in this field while challenging its harmful structure. This research is additionally salient, as it examines methodologies used in comparative political theory and proposes alternatives when necessary in order to avoid harmful outputs like cultural appropriation. Given my approach to this topic, the recommendations for moving forward are geared towards non-Indigenous researchers.

What is Comparative Political Theory?

Emergence

Comparative political theory is a sub field of political science that emerged in the 1990s. The emergence of this sub field reflected political theory's burgeoning engagement with post colonial literature. This literature discusses critiques of western political theory for its colonial roots and legacy of orientalist knowledge production. For instance, in her book *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith discusses how research and theory are practices embedded in colonial and imperial projects. Comparative political theory began as a recognition that it is necessary for students of political theory to fundamentally engage with traditions of political thought other than their own. It was argued by scholars like Fred Dallmayr that this comparative enterprise would assist in decentering the west as the epicenter of theory and knowledge.

Practice

Comparative political theory is the study of comparativity between different political traditions. Given that this field is still in its infancy, scholars like Michael Freeden and Andrew Vincent have argued that it lacks a robust analytical framework, and consists of studying equivalence rather than engaging in comparison. For instance, there is the lack of a consistent unit of analysis, which scholars like Freeden and Vincent argue are necessary to a systematized analytical approach. As this sub field consists largely of engaging with political traditions that have been othered in western theory, additional debates around methodology have arisen. Scholars like Farah Godrej have addressed concerns over how to navigate comparativity in a way that combats the privileging of western theory, and details how researchers in a western context can ethically engage with unfamiliar theoretical contexts. These methodological debates have been taken up when discussing political traditions all over the world, except with Indigenous traditions in Turtle Island (North America). The focus of this research project is to bring Indigenous political thought into these methodological discussions.

Canadian Political Theory and Indigenous Thought

Reconciling Indigenous and Dominant Political Theory

Several well-established Canadian political theorists have argued for the inclusion of Indigenous political thought on the basis of liberal multiculturalism. In discussions of theories around citizenship and rights, Alan Cairns and Will Kymlicka have argued for their own models of inclusion titled 'citizens plus' and 'minority rights,' respectively. Cairns' theory is claimed to be a middle ground between liberalists who argue for equal rights regardless of social position, and Indigenous peoples who advocate for self-government. Kymlicka's theory of 'minority rights' classifies Indigenous rights as a form of cultural rights, rather than rights that flow from Indigenous peoples legitimate status as Indigenous nations. Dale Turner uses the concept of the peace pipe to argue that although these theories push the boundaries of Canadian liberal political theory, they fail Indigenous political theory for four reasons: not adequately addressing the legacy of colonialism, not respecting Indigenous rights as rights that flow from Indigenous nationhood and are not bestowed by the Canadian state, not questioning the legitimacy of Canada's claim of sovereignty over Indigenous people's and land, and not recognizing the need for Indigenous participation in a theory of Indigenous rights and citizenship. Turner argues for the development of a critical Indigenous philosophy that includes Indigenous theorists, known as word warriors. The work of word warriors is to work with Indigenous forms of knowledge and reconcile them with the legal and political discourses of the state. Turner's theory is rooted in the assumption that it is imperative to work within colonial systems and gain recognition from them in order to advance Indigenous political thought.

Resurgence and Transformative Change

Not all theorists share the same assumption as Turner. Scholars like Leanne Simpson and Glen Coulthard have produced works that challenge the idea that Indigenous theory should be based in a politics of recognition. Rather, these scholars argue for an Indigenous theoretical framework that challenges the colonial foundations of the academy by privileging Indigenous intellectual traditions and community based processes of knowledge production. By privileging work done by Indigenous scholars instead of focusing on reconciling Indigenous and dominant political theory, there is work being done that goes beyond a colonial mentality, by forming new pathways of thought and action. They argue this framework promotes liberation, re-traditionalization of Indigenous institutions, and decolonization of Indigenous nations in Canada. This includes a focus on self-affirmation over recognition as a vital part of decolonization. Additional literature has been produced by scholars like Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel who focus on Indigenous resurgence as a transformative and liberatory movement. Focusing on resurgence is as a way of moving away from theories that discuss rights, reconciliation, and resources that function to separate Indigenous peoples from land, culture, and community, and distract decolonizing movements.

This brief overview of current literature and debates on Indigenous political thought and Canadian political theory reveals that there is a central tension between scholars who argue for the reconciling of dominant Canadian political theory and Indigenous thought, and scholars who argue that Indigenous theory frameworks should be based in self-affirmation and privileging Indigenous processes of knowledge production. What does this mean for comparative political theory as a sub field? How do these tensions relate to debates in comparative political theory when looking at Indigenous thought?

Comparative Political Theory and Indigenous Thought

Exclusion

Despite the robust and multilayered debates around Indigenous and Canadian political thought, Indigenous political thought has been conspicuously absent from discussions in the sub field of comparative political thought. Recently, scholars have brought forth their arguments for why this absence is occurring and what it reveals about the sub field. Kennan Ferguson argues that since Indigenous peoples and their culture and political life have been deliberately erased, western theory is not willing to recognize Indigenous thought as being legitimate. He further suggests that Indigenous thought cannot be subsumed into the civilizational approach the sub field has adopted. Indigenous thought also challenges the main concepts that western theory centers on, and Franke Wilmer argues that these concepts cannot encapsulate Indigenous society or experiences. Kevin Bruyee's argument that comparative political thought over focuses on concepts like sovereignty and the state echoes the arguments of scholars invested in Indigenous resurgence that these debates serve to distract rather than broaden understandings of knowledge.

Inclusion

Given the recent arguments for why Indigenous thought has been excluded in comparative political thought and why it should be included, there are several caveats I would like to put forward as these discussions continue. Firstly, as per the arguments of Bruyee, Godrej, and Ferguson; the inclusion of Indigenous political thought should not amount to an 'add and stir' approach. Rather, the inclusion of Indigenous political thought should seek to destabilize and challenge the foundational assumptions of comparative political theory. This point addresses the concerns raised in resurgence scholarship, as it seeks to challenge the idea of tolerance versus inclusion. Secondly, the potential for epistemic violence needs to be addressed. Chris Goto-Jones points out that within this sub field, there is the assumption that the political traditions being compared are willing to be in conversation with each other. It is vital to consider the implications of this, given earlier assertions that western political thought has been engaged in a legacy of erasing Indigenous political theory and life. I submit that the questioning intent behind comparing Indigenous political thought and other political traditions needs to be addressed going forward, and should be stated as part of the methodology in future research. Another potential instance of epistemic violence is cultural appropriation. In this context, the kind of cultural appropriation is referred to by scholars like Celia Haig-Brown as post-modern quotation. This is where Indigenous knowledge is decontextualized and presented outside of its significance to the community it comes from. In order to avoid this harmful research outcome, I suggest that researchers engage with Godrej's methodology of self-dislocation and Haig-Brown's methodology of deep learning. Further, it should not be the goal of a non-Indigenous researcher to transcend their positionality to become fully immersed in Indigenous thought. Rather, positionality should be acknowledged and worked with to understand the researchers own limitations.

Moving Forward

Here are my additional recommendations for researchers of comparative political theory seeking to engage in ethical comparison with Indigenous thought:

- Integrate the work of Smith (who has already been cited by scholars like Wilmer) as part of a consistent methodology, as she gives a historical basis for the harmful work of research and discusses the need to decolonize the self and the academy
- Pursue methodologies like feminist participatory action research that are based on collaborative relationships that focus on consent between communities and the researcher, mutually beneficial outputs, and the necessity of Indigenous participation in research
- Pursuing methodologies that emphasize the need to continuously be self-reflexive when engaging in this research, as demonstrated in the work of Marjorie DeVault and Glenda Gross
- Following guidelines for engaging in research with Indigenous communities like the University of Victoria's *Protocol's and Principles for Conducting Research in an Indigenous Context* that highlight the necessity of following community guidelines around knowledge production and sharing

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