

Relationality, Comparison, and Decolonising Political Theory

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Abstract

Over the last few decades, relationality has become a buzzword across different disciplines of social and political sciences, which has initiated the talks of a “relational turn.” In its broadest sense, relationality offers a critique of individualist models of analysis. The relations within and in-between individuals, societies, institutions, and human and non-human objects are considered not simply as a mode of interaction between separated and disparate entities, but these entities are thought to be “constituting and being constituted by” the relations of which they are part. In this paper, I aim to explore relationality and comparison in political theory, especially concerning comparative political theory. Although comparative political theory is an emerging subfield that explores the works of “non-Western” political thinkers as well as “non-Western” ideas about politics; the comparison aspect of comparative political theory is not quite novel. Political theorists have been comparing different ideas from different traditions since the establishment of the field. What is novel about the comparative political theory is rather its growing influence and precursory role in “decolonizing” political theory and theorizing from the margins. While this is a meaningful and inspiring effort, the subject of analysis, as well as both the author and audience in this attempt, is still Western. Hence, comparative political theory has also been argued to reproduce the dichotomy that it was set to demolish, which is the separation, if not the divide, between Western and non-Western intellectual traditions. This paper will rethink this puzzle of comparison as a method for decolonizing political theory concerning relationality and address two main questions: Can relationality provide a better normative basis for decolonizing the way we think about political concepts and issues? Should comparative political theory become more relational to respond to the broader decolonial challenges it addresses?

Over the last few decades, two broader themes have gained considerable interest among political theorists, which also coincides with the project of decolonising political theory beyond its Western-centric scope, objectives, and modes of inquiry.

First, with the widespread calls for re-centring political theory beyond the Western canon from both a more global and more localized perspective at the same time, comparative political theory (CPT) has gained considerable attention as an emerging subfield that brings non-Western ideas, thinkers, methods, and questions into the centre of political thinking. In the intersection of comparative politics and political theory, CPT implies that this process can be ameliorated through the use of methods of comparison. Although what comparison entails as a methodology in CPT remains to be an ongoing debate between comparative political theorists (see: El Amine 2016; Dallmayr 2004; Euben 1997, 1999; Godrej 2009; Idris 2016; March 2009; Von Vacano 2015), CPT as a subfield that is mainly composed of political scientists has been argued to expand the locus and scope of political thought since the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Second, right around the same time, there has also been a rise in the use of “relational” approaches across various disciplines and subfields in social sciences, not just political science but also anthropology, sociology, psychology, and law. In political science, we can observe this broader trend by the growing number of references to “relational approaches,” “relational politics,” or “politics of relationality” across different sub-fields including international relations, comparative politics, and political theory (see: Topolski 2015; de Oliveira Paes and

Linares 2019; Qin 2018; Selg and Ventsel 2020). These relational approaches often subsumed under the phrase “the relation turn” placed a similar critique, targeting not just the separation between the East and the West, but the broader separationist paradigm in Western liberal thought. By challenging the individualistic assumptions of Western liberal discourse, theories of relationality challenge the foundational ideals and thought patterns that are based on binary thinking, including values such as autonomy, agency, subjectivity, and freedom. In contrast, they highlight embedded networks of relations between individuals, groups, communities, institutions, geographical spaces, environment, law, human and non-human actors or actants, etc.

Despite their growing popularity and promises for the future, both relationality and comparative political theory suffer from a similar problem: what they actually mean, in themselves and relation to one another, including their theoretical/methodological implications and conceptual/historical genealogies, remain largely unclear and undertheorized. As a result, while covering parallel domains in their critique posited against foundational assumptions of Western liberal discourse, the theoretical exchanges between them remain rather implicit, if not vague. Relationality and relations are common themes that will come up in key works of CPT. Similarly, non-Western traditions being more susceptible to “relational” ideas are commonly observed across all relational works in political science. But explicit explorations of thinking these two perspectives in dialogue with one another are rare. Hence, because of this gap in our political theorizing, relationality and CPT are rarely thought together in their responses to the need for moving toward decolonial futures in political theory as well.

In its broadest form, relationality does offer us a critique of atomistic models of human nature and of the assumption that the individual should be the primary unit of political analysis. Relationships are considered not simply as a primary mode of social interaction (between persons, societies, institutions, places, and non-human objects), but as interactions that are “in a relational ecology of constituting and constitutive meaning” (Winter 1990; Nedelsky 2011) In this regard, most relational approaches are conceptually adjacent to, but at the same time different from, the communitarian critiques of liberalism, as they also implicitly and explicitly draw interconnections with Chinese, Buddhist, Islamic, Black, and Indigenous political thought.

Similarly, March (2009) argues that the comparison aspect of CPT is not what makes this emerging sub-field stand out rather than simply a part of political theory *proprie*: political theorists and comparative philosophers have been comparing different ideas from different traditions since the establishment of the field. What is novel about CPT is rather its growing influence and precursory role in decolonizing political theory; expanding the scope, focus, and subject of political theory beyond the Western canon; and repositioning the starting point of political theorizing from the centre to the margins. Diego Von Vacano (2015), for instance, defines CPT as “a call to cross borders and travel—sometimes metaphorically, sometimes literally—to gain insight by looking at problems from perspectives outside the Western one” (Von Vacano 2015, 467). Murad Idris (2016) adds that CPT is not just a subfield, but a critique of political theory, which inaccurately identifies itself as global although it is contextually

specific to a very particular geography of the place, historicity, and discourse within the boundaries of the Euro-American West.

Like relationality, CPT is in an ongoing dialogue with not just non-Western traditions of political thought, but also other critical traditions within Western thought including postcolonial, decolonial, poststructuralist, post-Orientalist, feminist, new materialist theories. The call CPT makes by invoking comparison as a method to challenge this overreliance is for political theorists to expand their location of thought through world-travelling, as Lugones (1987) might call it, which is also in line with Von Vacano's formerly mentioned suggestion. In practice, however, this has led to a quick fix of equating "comparative" with "non-Western," and reiterated not only an assumed dichotomy between the West and non-West but also a false sense of confidence about the very presupposition that the boundaries that separate the West and non-West are self-evident and universally accepted, along with the boundaries between different non-Western traditions of thought being falsely assumed to be distinct and clear (Idris 2016, 2). Despite its promise, therefore, CPT has also been argued to reproduce the dichotomy that it was set to demolish, which is the divide, if not the separation, between the Western and non-Western intellectual traditions (Idris 2016; El Amine 2016). There might be different reasons why this has happened, but given the focus of this paper, I will focus on the assumed necessity of distinct and separate knowledges for the comparison method to be successful (Dallmayr 2004, March 2009).

Thus, in this paper, I will rethink this puzzle of comparison as a method for decolonizing political theory from a relational perspective with respect to two broad guiding questions: If we think comparison and relationality together, would that provide a better normative basis than comparison alone for decolonizing political theory? Should CPT become more relational to respond to the current broader decolonial challenges and not just the challenges it has set for itself since Roxanne Euben has used the term for the first time in 1997? In this paper, after providing a brief overview of the key historical processes that have led to the need for establishing a comparative sub-section in political theory, I aim to think through these questions by exploring relationality in key works of CPT by focusing on (1) subjectivity and autonomy and (2) otherness and difference. In so doing, I will also address two puzzles comparative political theorists have identified in their reflections about this emerging subfield: critique in non-Western thought and the necessity of distinction in comparison. I argue that rethinking comparison together with relationality might offer some insight into how we might be able to start to understand the inner dynamics behind these puzzles from a non-dualistic perspective.

Background: Modernity and Globalization

Two broad historical processes have been central to the emergence and development of CPT: modernity and globalization. Although these two processes have distinct features of their own, it is the intricate interrelation between them that requires rethinking political theory from multiple locations.

According to El Amine, for example, modernity (and not modernization theory) is a shared phenomenon that interlinks the East and the West. The institutional, bureaucratic, and paradigmatic structures modernity has set might have emerged in the West, but since it transformed how different countries operated on a global level, the rest of the world had to follow, albeit in their own ways. For this reason, El Amine argues that if political theorists genuinely aim to take political theory beyond East and West without reproducing mutual essentializations of the East and the West, they should take into account modernity as a global paradigmatic condition shared by the East and the West, the North and South, First World and Third World (El Amine 2016, 106). Along with the advent of the modern, therefore, the second historical factor that has motivated political theorists to engage with non-Western traditions is globalization. CPT, in many ways, developed as a response to the challenges that culminated in the urgent need to reconceptualize a more globally situated but at the same time more localized forms of political theory to include non-Western ideas, questions, texts, thinkers, and methods through comparison.

While reflecting on the historical conditions that have guided political theorists toward an intercultural dialogue between different traditions of thought, Fred Dallmayr references Maurice Merleau-Ponty's reading of Charles Péguy and distinguishes between "periods" and "epochs" (Dallmayr 2020, 1; Merleau-Ponty 1969, xvii; Von Vacano 2015, 467). While periods indicate order, stability, and predictability; "epochs" signal troubling, restless, unpredictable times, signalling that the world is in the verge of paradigm-shifting socio-political and institutional transformation that is long overdue.

Dallmayr unsurprisingly observes that the current epoch we are in started with the advent of modern after a long period of unrest and successive inter- and-intra-religious wars in Europe, putting an end to the religious empires. This new epoch of the modern age was created based on two main pillars that were held in unresolved tension: individual autonomy and the sovereignty of the modern nation-state. The first one, the individualistic conception of the modern human subject, is based on Descartes' thinking subject (*ego cogitans*) where the emphasis is placed on reason and autonomy of the individual (that is white men with property); while the second was established with the Treaty of Westphalia (Dallmayr 2020, 1-5).

According to Dallmayr, troubles and tribulations with the modern age commenced long ago. Right now, we are in the place that Arendt refers to as an "odd in-between (...) determined by things that are no longer and by things that are not yet" (Arendt 2006, 9). In this odd in-between where the old structures no longer serve their intended purposes—globalization has been challenging the existence of the fully sovereign nation-state and its radically autonomous political subjects. Instead of providing stability and certainty in response to the ongoing the global challenges, these principles which were once the main pillars of the modern age morph into caricatures of themselves, reducing Descartes' *ego cogitans* into egotistical, self-centred, self-serving individual and sovereign nation-state to rather become a source of "ambivalent agendas of nationalism and chauvinism," which intensifies the internal political, class-driven, socio-cultural tensions demonstrated by growing racialized, ethnic, and religious inequalities (Dallmayr 2020, 1-3). Dallmayr argues, in this regard, globalization indicates a paradigm shift

away from stability, that is, away from the stable identities and stable structures of the olden “modern age,” toward a structure that is based on difference, diversity and otherness, which requires intercultural dialogue between different traditions rather than monologue and monism of universalism (Dallmayr 2020, 5; 2004, 252). From this perspective, Dallmayr as the “foundational father” of CPT (Von Vacano 2015, 467) thinks that by shifting our analysis toward intercultural dialogue between different traditions we can move one step closer to this paradigm shift. For example, for Dallmayr, nondualism (*advaita*) principle in Indian thought or the emphasis on five relationships in classical Chinese philosophy can be alternative starting points that can lead the way (Dallmayr 2020, 5). As Anthony Parel suggests diversity and plurality resulting from decentering political theory away from (false) universalisms to difference does not mean “endorsement of relativism or radical incommensurability” (Parel 1992, 12; Dallmayr 2004, 252), but rather it points us toward better and more accurate normative foundations that can help us understand and explain the global paradigm shift the world is yet to see. In this regard, CPT is also contextually specific to the current transition we are going under, our in-between position, which started two centuries ago according to Dallmayr, but with the advancement of globalization in the 1990s, took a slightly more peculiar turn.

In this light, Von Vacano states that CPT responds to three main critiques that have gained academic traction during the 1990s and are still relevant in understanding world politics today. First are the critiques of Orientalism. Indeed, critical approaches to Western modernity starting with Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1979) especially in the last few decades with the growing awareness toward Western-centric foundations of political theory with the help of postcolonial, decolonial, feminist, queer approaches as well as CPT.

The second targets the critiques of “formal comparative politics” (Von Vacano 2015, 467). This debate is also interconnected with the broader debates in political science about subfield interrelations, especially the joint and/or hybrid explorations of comparative politics and political theory. According to Von Vacano, Roxanne Euben’s work on Qutb illustrates this. Rather than formal comparativist accounts of fundamentalism, “Euben juxtaposed Qutb’s critique of modernity with those of Western critics—Arendt, MacIntyre, Bellah, and Taylor—to show that the parallels prove that Qutb’s views are not irrational or repressive but are another side of modernity” (Von Vacano 2015, 467; Euben 1999).

Von Vacano refers to the last set of critiques as the critiques of the Fukuyama-Huntington theses, two widely-read works in political science during the 1990s, that tackle the questions that arise after the end of the Cold War and the rise of globalization: Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), which argues there no longer exists an alternative to liberal democracy after the fall of Berlin Wall, and thus, the end of cold war also ended the history, and Samuel Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (1996), that asserts the end of the Cold War indicated a remaking of the world order that is organized around cultural blocks, not political ideologies, polarizing the difference between the West and the rest, and the contexts that were in-between, according to Huntington, would remain as “torn countries” if they failed to take a side and declined to redefine their

civilizational identity accordingly. The Fukuyama-Huntington theses, therefore, relied on and intensified the mutual negation, opposition, incompatibility, and otherization across ideological and cultural divides—which has in turn cultivated a renewed interest in value conflicts (Von Vacano 2015, 467).

CPT, in this regard, emerged and was developed as a response to the broader historical developments of modernity and globalization, and more specific critiques at the intersection of both. As relevant as these developments and critiques still are and despite the continuities between the past and present, the world during the 1990s and the world today is not the same. On the one hand, the post-modern, post-secular, post-human, post-pandemic, post-environment world we are living in is becoming more interconnected, diverse, and fluid so that boundaries and borders are negotiated in everyday politics, at micro and macro levels. On the other hand, it is also becoming perhaps more polarized than ever with rising equality, precarity, ecological crisis, populism, and authoritarianism. As the current global political challenges are becoming much more interrelated and interdependent with one another, the linear dualistic logics of local/global, individual/community, man/woman, human/non-human cannot fully explain what is at stake on their own. Then the question becomes: How do the current developments affect the broader project of decolonizing political theory and comparative political theory? How do we draw the boundaries between what is Western and what is non-Western under growing interconnectedness? Who draws the boundaries of comparison? As these questions foreshadow, many puzzles in CPT demands further thought, which I will discuss in the next section.

Puzzles of Comparison: Critique and Distinction

The main goal of comparative political theory is to expand the borders and boundaries of political theorizing beyond the Western canon. However, according to March, using the term “comparative” to describe one’s interest in non-Western political theory is puzzling because, in March’s words, “comparison must be, in the first place, a method” (March 2009, 537). Moreover, March distinguishes between “scholarly” and “engaged” forms of activity in political theory: The former seeks to investigate “whether we *understand well enough* a given text, practice, or phenomenon” (March 2009, 534), the latter “whether some set of ideas [is] *right ideas for us*” (March 2009, 535). March contends that what is comparative about scholarly forms of CPT is rather obvious as they aim to provide a better understanding of non-Western political thinkers and traditions outside of the Western liberal canon, however, these studies do not necessarily use comparison as a method. As the meaning behind comparison in comparative political theory remains uncertain, the main puzzle in CPT is therefore about the significance of comparison as a method in political theory and whether comparison is the right method for decolonizing political thought. In addition to this broader puzzle of comparison in CPT as a methodology that is relatively more commonly acknowledged, comparative political theorists have identified more specific internal contestations within the field that require further exploration and elaboration. To set the groundwork on why and how relationality can be helpful in more accurately understanding these puzzles, I will be looking at two of them in

greater detail: (1) the limits of critique in cross-cultural comparison, and (2) the reliance of distinction as a prerequisite for comparison.

The first one is about the rigour of critique while engaging with non-Western texts. Is critique a Western value? Is disagreement a Western value? If we engage critically with non-Western political theories (as we do with the Western thought), would that automatically contribute to Western-centric hegemony? Should non-Western political theorizing be fully affirmative? It is observed that when political theorists engage with non-Western texts, the level of criticism they place against the text is less ambitious than when they engage with Western texts. According to El Amine, the question to ask here is, “why is it that political theory concerned with the East should look more like anthropology than political theory concerned with the West?” (El Amine 2016, 104) This is coupled with the assertion that disagreement emerging from a non-Western text about, say Western liberalism, or a more specific Western liberal value, is sufficient in itself. As a result, the level of critical engagement with the non-Western texts remains limited. Thus, in CPT, although scholars argue that non-Western texts should be in dialogue with the Western texts, but at the same time non-Western texts are assumed to be treated fully on their own terms, which does not leave much room for cross-cultural engagement (March 2009, 545-7). As March posits, “Comparative political theory, I believe, must leave space for political theorists to critique and even reject some of the non-Western views and theories that we are trying to bring in without fear of necessarily reinforcing hegemony” (March 2009, 563). El Amine agrees March (2009) on both the philosophical significance of this practice as well as the assumed contributions this makes to decolonizing the Western-centric roots of political theory “since political theory is already comparative and its historical methods are already sensitive to context” (El Amine 2016, 104).

The second puzzle is about the assumption of distinction as a prerequisite for comparison. CPT relies on a distinct ontological separation between Western and non-Western knowledges, which might lead to a false assumption that non-Western ideas are “alien” (March 2009, 531) Although CPT has emerged as an effort to respond to the globalization and move toward a more global political thought that aims to decolonize Western hegemony in political theory, as El Amine argues, one of the greatest puzzles of CPT is that fails to take the debate beyond the East-West dichotomy (El Amine 2016, 102). According to El Amine, this is because of the over-emphasis of divergences and differences between assumed-to-be distinct and disparate traditions of thought, without accounting for the shared normative and conceptual convergences, such as the shared institutional condition of modernity and the sovereign state.

Similarly, according to March, comparison in political theory makes two main assumptions: (1) A specific common object of inquiry (2) Distinction (March 2009, 537). March argues comparison requires not only distinct units of analysis, “but their differences also have to be enduring and generative of knowledge or insights greater than what is derived from treating them in noncomparative ways” (March 2009, 537). But what does this enduring difference mean and signify? How do we draw distinct boundaries between ideas, concepts, norms, and values across different traditions? What makes the difference between such ideas, concepts,

norms, and values enduring? In so doing, are comparative political theorists helping to fixate non-Western traditions the eternally enduring ontological Others of the Western canon?

According to El Amine, CPT, by definition, relies on the premise that the traditions, practices, values of the East are necessarily distinct and different from that of the West, so that the “comparison” element of comparative political theory is not only a scholarly preference or choice, but it has an epistemic value to claim universality. This foundation assumption of distinction, according to El Amine unintendedly serves to fix and fixate the boundaries between the West and non-West. In this regard, this presumption of founding difference that neglects the similarities between the East and the West, as well as the fact that the boundaries between what is considered to be the East and the West are decided by the West, ignored a very important shared condition between the two sides of the world: Modernity. Thus, El Amine argues that by failing to recognize modernity as a shared condition outside of modernization theory, CPT reinforces the divide it was set to demolish: the East/West divide (El Amine 2016, 102-103).

The problem with drawing distinct boundaries between the East and West is also coupled with the question of authenticity. Who is more authentically Western or non-Western? This question only makes sense if we assume there are distinct boundaries between the East and West (El Amine 2016, 104.) As an example, El Amine mentions Jenco's view about Chakrabarty's “Anglicized education” and his participation in Western academia, which according to Jenco, leads him to a conclusion that it is not possible to avoid Western categories. According to El Amine, this line of thought drives us to an essentialist question of who can be considered more authentically non-Western (El Amine 2016, 105). This can also be extended to the privileging of the “rural” residents of the East as the more “authentic” Easterners and arguing that the educated, urban, modern Easterners are not Eastern enough to be taken seriously as “authentically” Eastern, at least not in prominent Western scholarship, including Lila Abu-Lughod's writings, El Amine argues (El Amine 2016, 105). If the West remains as the privileged theorist, the author, the subject; and the East can only be authentically Eastern enough it stays rural, poor, and non-modern, then what has CPT accomplished? Indeed, the question remains. If CPT reiterates rather than challenges the East/West divide, what does it accomplish for the non-Western audience (and not the Western audience) by being more inclusive toward non-Western approaches?

According to El Amine, therefore, there is a difference between Westernization and modernity. And that, modernity is not necessarily Western as supporters of modernization theory proclaim. For El Amine, the distinction should be between modern and pre-modern. While non-modern is a status the West associates with the East, pre-modern takes the debate somewhere else and delineates the importance of modernity as a shared condition between the West and the East (El Amine 2016, 103). However, this seems like trading one binary distinction for another; it does not address the problem of distinction itself, and the hierarchy and power asymmetry between the distinct and separate ends of a linear continuum we continue to reductively assume, which can simplify but cannot fully capture the complex political problems that are central to CPT. In this regard, El Amine does not question the need for “distinction,” but argues

that we can use better distinction than East/West, which can potentially lead us to portray the problem and guide the intercultural dialogue more accurately. This can also be tied to the point Freedman (2013) makes about the argument that “the West” as implied in the CPT does not really exist; it is a caricature. If we are after most authentic representations of the non-West “pristine and untouched by Anglicized education or debates” as El Amine states, but while doing so, we apply this question of authenticity only to non-West, then this shows a bias (El Amine 2016, 105).

After setting this historical background and introducing two conceptual puzzles in CPT, regarding critique and distinction, in the next two sections, I will take a closer look at (1) subjectivity and autonomy and (2) difference and otherness in CPT.

Subjectivity and Autonomy

In this section, I will start my discussion with the critiques of individualistic models of subjectivity and atomistic models of autonomy in key works of CPT, I will then bring in relational psychoanalytical models of subjectivity and relational feminist models of autonomy that put across similar challenges. I argue that both strands of literature call out for the need for rethinking the assumption of the subject of politics as the self-interested, rational, “the free-standing man,” whose existence is defined against a series of Others, that are necessarily distinct and separate from the Self. With the help of relational models, I will argue that we might understand the inner workings of the conceptual challenges associated with the principle of distinction in CPT by using Kenneth Gergen’s theory of relational multi-being.

CPT indeed offers us a diverse array of critiques to consider in this regard, often echoing communitarian critiques of liberal democracy (such as MacIntyre 1984; Sandel 1998; Taylor 1985). For example, Filippo Dionigi (2012) argues that rather than assuming an enduring divide between Western and Islamic traditions of thought, it is possible to think about “Islamism” as a way of communitarianism as both promote establishing common spaces for public reasoning (Dionigi 2012, 74). Based on the works of three Islamic thinkers, Dionigi argues that, in “Islamism,” the community has the role of ‘social matrix’—where the person and community are mutually constitutive. Whereas, with the help of Confucian thought, Ackerly (2005) particularly problematizes the Western liberal assumption of a rights-bearing citizen with an individualistic notion of autonomy. While the idea of individual rights has emerged as a liberal solution to check on otherwise untested political authority, due to liberalism’s close connections with property (in theory) and the coupling of capitalism and liberal democracy (in the way how reality unfolded in the Western world), this assumption has been shrunk to self-interest. Thus, Ackerly offers an alternative route for rethinking democracy without an individualistic conception of autonomy and liberal rights through Confucianism. Like Ackerly’s study of Confucian democratic theory, Farah Godrej (2006)’s study of Gandhi and non-violence is important because of the possibility of rethinking non-violence as an alternative way of arriving at a plural judgment while arbitrating competing truth claims. For Godrej, Gandhi’s vision offers not only a more complete understanding of political life but also

a better approach to resolving competing moral claims than contemporary political pluralists, such as the Rawlsian theory of justice.

Dionigi is interested in the concepts of “person” and “community” respectively in contemporary Western communitarian thought and in the works of select “Islamist” thinkers whose work touches on similar debates. Dionigi considers his work opens space in political theory for further theorizing and space for Islamism to be thought of as a “theory” and not a “social phenomenon.” Of course, Dionigi’s claims rest on some assumptions about what Islam is and how it is perceived, yet he fails to offer us an explicit reflection, explanation, or justification of these assumptions. Although he does include multiple thinkers, not limited to the Sunni tradition in Islam, what he means by “Islamism” remains unclear. Moreover, given that this vagueness offers him space for ignoring Islamism as a politico-religious doctrine, which in turn grants him the opportunity to analyse it as a theory and draw interlinkages with communitarianism, his lack of definition of what he means by Islamism is also problematic.

Dionigi starts his discussion with an outline of key Western communitarian thinkers. This discussion is particularly insightful for showing us that the Western liberal emphasis on “individualism” is highly contested even internally, within the Western discourse. Therefore, challenging the approaches that reduce the “Western” perspective into this very assumption. According to the communitarian thinkers, the idea of self emerges from the positionality of the self within a particular community, embedded social relations, and through which we develop our idea of the good. Dionigi argues that Islamism offers a similar conception. For example, according to Dionigi, Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849–1905), writing amidst the Fall of the Ottoman Empire and early British and French colonial rule in the Middle East, was critical toward blind Westernization based on imitation (both *taqlid* and *taghrib*) as well as the local religious and cultural institutions that could not respond to the necessary demands of modernization. Separating Westernization from modernization, he argued that adopting Western institutions would only make sense if these institutions were coupled with an ethos of an Islamic “community.” Dionigi argues, ‘Abduh’s theory “attributes a degree of moral agency to the person its use is embedded within the Islamic tradition which establishes its moral orientation.” (Dionigi 2012, 84-85). Dionigi highlights two Islamic principles in Abduh’s theory: 1) *ijm* ‘a (or the understanding that guides the ruler to consult with his community 2) *shura* (or consultation). According to Abduh, and many other Islamic scholars, Dionigi argues, *ijm* ‘a and *shura* are perceived as community-ridden restrictions to the ruler’s power, in addition to the divine restrictions under the Sharia law (Dionigi 2012, 86-87). Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966) had a less accepting standpoint toward liberal norms than Abduh. Qutb advocated the need for an Islamic revolution to bring back the Islamic community under the sovereignty of God (*hakimiyyat Allah*) after the abolishment of the Caliphate in 1923, “in which divine authority was substituted with the sovereignty of man over other men”—which, for Qutb, only signalled ignorance or *jahilliya* (Dionigi 2012, 88-89). Dionigi also looks at the works of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr (1935–1980) which he considers the precursor of Shiite political theory. In his discussion, Dionigi stresses Sadr’s take on the “good and just life” where Sadr reviews the answers generated by democratic capitalism, socialism, communism, and the Islamic system. According to Sadr, only Islamism can be successful in providing the right balance between the

“claims of community” and the individual’s spiritual being (Dionigi 2012, 89-90). Based on the works of these three Islamic thinkers, Dionigi argues that, in “Islamism,” community and the person are defined through their innate social relationality; they are mutually constitutive. Once again, Dionigi does not explain how inclusive the term “person” is here, whether or not the male and female Islamic subjects are treated equally as “persons.” Such a question remains unproblematized.

The political subject in Ackerly’s Confucian democratic theory is more relationally multi-faceted. According to Ackerly, a Confucian democratic theory, that is both Confucian and democratic, rather than a Western liberal democratic re-reading of Confucianism might elucidate ways in which Western liberal societies might develop alternative community-based citizenship models—centred around not just the individual, but also the family, society, community, and state. In so doing, Ackerly argues, a Confucian democratic theory might also have a “rehabilitative” effect: It might help us to recognize possible democratic contributions of an intellectual tradition that is commonly associated with elitism, exclusivity, and authoritarianism. It might also lead toward a wider recognition that democracy is a contested, contextually specific, and agonistic concept that is not limited to its Western connotations and experiences, but is dynamically resituated, and always takes form through a continuous dialogue with other value orientations, both internal and external, in each society and at a global level. Ackerly, therefore, argues that Confucian democracy has very important contributions to political theory. While emphasizing the importance of different relations between multiple actors, for example, Confucian democracy and democratic theory might show us that protecting the “humanity of people” is a way in which one cultivates and sustains one’s own humanity (Ackerly 2005, 549). This pushes toward a wider recognition that individuals “do not spring from the earth as fully formed adults but rather become citizens through the socialization processes of the family, community, and state” (Ackerly 2005, 549). As a tradition that has a hierarchical political history, locating democratic logic through the cracks of that history also offers a glimmer of hope to democratization processes in contexts elitism and authoritarianism prevailed. Perhaps most importantly, however, Confucian democratic thought urges us to remember that democracy in both Western and non-Western thought is a highly contested concept despite the commonality of the assumption that it is an organic extension of Western liberalism. The internal contestations of democracy require first and foremost requires a reconsideration of foundational values of democracy autonomy and subjectivity (Ackerly 2005, 549).

According to Ackerly, Confucianism has an evolving democratic logic within it along with internal contestations, and this democratic logic has three main features. The first one is the foundational early Confucian value of “*ren*,” revitalized also by the Neo-Confucianists in the Song and Ming dynasties, and thus remains central for contemporary Confucianism (Ackerly 2005, 552). Ackerly reads *ren* as a disposition of “the heart/mind of human beings” toward other human beings. For Ackerly, her reading is in line with Mengzi’s broader neo-Confucianist understanding of social responsibility beyond more hierarchal readings of *ren* that limits this disposition not just one’s own heart and mind, but also in direct relation to one’s close relationships, including friends and family, as well as the state. According to Ackerly,

therefore, *ren* (as it appears in historical texts, affirmed by its neo-Confucianist readings) can be considered as a system of obligation based on respect for close relationships and requiring the extension of human behaviour toward those beyond one's immediate relationships. Coupled with a positive understanding of human nature, Ackerly thinks *ren* can guide social criticism in a Confucian democracy (Ackerly 2005, 554).

The second building block is Mengzi's notion of human nature that views human nature as essentially good without implications of an assumed hierarchy attached to it. Following Mengzi, Ackerly, therefore, suggests that human nature needs to be directed toward "the way" (*dao*) and toward enhancing the essentially good human potential, that is, not toward suppressing an innately bad human nature. Consequently, a Confucian democracy must foster a Confucian way of life through which, in cultivating *ren* in a way that is directed toward perfecting the essentially good human nature with a sense of social responsibility that includes one's close relationships so that, in so doing, equality can also be cultivated and cherished as politics for all people (*tian xia weigong*) (Ackerly 2005, 554).

Third, following Kongzi, Ackerly argues that Confucian democracy should be coupled with the obligation to criticize political authority as a foundation of democracy by offering an institutional space for contestation. This space of contestation will offer every citizen an opportunity to self-reflect on their own practices upon receiving external criticism or criticism coming from the margins as well as a space for criticizing political practices that do not align with the way. Using these three aspects of Confucianism (which are all contested concepts) as a foundation, Ackerly suggests that, we can think about the Confucian democratic way (*dao*) through understanding and fostering alternative democratic values: ritual propriety (*li*), righteousness (*yi*), wisdom (*zhi*), right action (*xin*), reverence (*jing*), benevolence (*hui*), dutifulness (*zhong*), thinking (*si*), and virtue (*de*) in addition to the common Western liberal democratic values of equality, responsibility, transparency, accountability, etc. (Ackerly 2005, 553). According to Ackerly, therefore, in addition to social relationality, Confucian democratic thought reminds us that our subjectivity is built, perfected, and challenged in relation to values, institutions, ideas, and practices beyond an understanding that expands the binary vision of individual and the community, or the tripartite divisions of the family, civil society, and the state.

Godrej similarly commences with the democratic question, but her focus is directed toward how a person should judge between multiple different truth claims and how this task constitutively shapes an individual's own self-cultivation of oneself and one's choices (Godrej 2006, 287). Godrej explains Gandhi's metaphysics and epistemology by firstly turning to Truth and differentiating between Absolute Truth and relative truths. In the Hindu tradition of nonduality or nondualism (*advaita*), Godrej explains, Truth is divine consciousness, holding the universe together and humans participate in this process by perfecting themselves (like Ackerly's second pillar of Confucian democratic theory where humans cultivate *ren* through perfecting their essentially good human nature), through which they transcend themselves with the hope of reunifying with divine consciousness, Absolute Truth, or God. However, Absolute Truth is not the only truth. It has many forms, faces, and manifestations. Beneath Absolute

Truth (in capital letters), there are relative truths (in small letters). Relative truths are different and often in contestation with one another, but not fully distinct from one another. Each contains a piece of Absolute Truth (Godrej 2006, 289-290). Gandhi's journey with Truth may thus appear to be quite Platonic. There is an important difference, though. For Gandhi, the alternative to Absolute Truth is not mere shadows, half-truths, or false truths. They are relative truths with always a relative degree of validity. For Gandhi, therefore, politics is a quest for truth, and it cannot be assumed completely distinct and separate from the social, economic, and religious realms of life, which are all interrelated (Godrej 2006, 293-94). And thus, the question is: What happens when these partial truths conflict with one another? In this regard, Godrej's discussion of Gandhi's Truth may remind us of Kant's aesthetic judgment, where categorical imperatives do not exist.

For Godrej, the challenge in Gandhi's vision is twofold: epistemological and moral/political. The epistemological issue is about knowing whether our own grasp of the relative truth is accurate and what we do when our relative truths conflict with one another. The moral/political issue follows from this, without confirming our grasp of the relative truth, is it ever possible to justify moral/political action? For Gandhi, Godrej argues, the possibility of approximating Absolute knowledge from relative knowledges is valid, yet open to failure and error. Gandhi's answer to the epistemological and the moral/political questions, according to Godrej, lies in his notion of nonviolence or *ahimsa* (Godrej 2006, 294), which involves the cultivation of multiple virtues such as "truth, non-violence, celibacy, control of the palate, non-thieving, nonpossession, self-reliance, and fearlessness" (Godrej 2006, 296).

In Godrej's understanding, Gandhi's principle of nonviolence draws from the problem of moral authority in a world of relative knowledges. In a world where we cannot be certain about our knowledge of Truth, how do we determine the right form of political action? Gandhi's answer points toward one's relations to others. According to Gandhi, our actions should not cause hurt with others. Yet this answer is more than a simple non-engagement principle regarding physical violence. Nonviolence, or *ahimsa*, is tied to the cultivation of certain virtues. In Gandhi's words: "it means not injuring any living being, whether by body or mind." But it also has a broader, more positive aspect that implies "the largest love, the greatest charity (...) compassion, and forgiveness" (Godrej 2006, 295). In its broader sense, therefore, nonviolence can be understood as the Absolute Truth.

The practice of *ahimsa* involves the systematic cultivation of various virtues in daily life. But here Gandhi's understanding of the habit of *ahimsa* is not a habit we practice unknowingly or unconsciously, say as Pierre Bourdieu's use of habitus while talking about habit worlds, rather this practice is accompanied by self-examination and self-regulation, and therefore closer to the Aristotelian notion of habitus/hexis that should be accompanied by *phronesis*. This requires self-transformation through the training of the will. Like the Kantian conscience, the habitualized practice of *ahimsa* must be driven by duty rather than by self-interest, to achieve moral autonomy. Indeed, there are many parallels between Kant's discussion on aesthetic or moral judgment and Gandhi's Truth and *ahimsa* as well as divergences. For one, for Kant, the answer lies in wooing one another's consent. Although Kant believes internal dialogue counts

as deliberation, for Gandhi, the process is mostly internal, achieved through intensive training of the will and the conscience.

This brings us to the practice of *satyagraha* (“truth-force,” “soul-force,” “holding firm to the truth,”) Gandhi’s doctrine of political action. But more practically “it refers to the political tactics of resistance, such as civil disobedience and active noncooperation in the form of strikes, fasts, sit-ins, and deliberate law-breaking, along with the strict commitment to the disavowal of violence for gaining an advantage” (Godrej 2006, 299). The moral justification behind *satyagraha*, or the political actions such as strikes, boycotts, or protest movements rests on an assumption that, preceding the action, the activists’ understanding of truth has been tested internally through *ahimsa*. According to Godrej, although Gandhian model is derived from Hinduism, its audience is broader and can be more secular. In her view, we can view *ahimsa* as policy, not as creed. It is a public virtue, a mode of action. Godrej argues this is possible because of three elements from Gandhi’s understanding of *ahimsa* as a civic virtue: 1) The emphasis on humility and fallibility 2) capacity for self-examination and self-correction (through both reason and faith) 3) and self-suffering (not self-injury) that is understood as a tool for political action.

In this regard, Godrej’s discussion of Gandhi’s *ahimsa* relies on emotive, non-rational elements which contradicts a prototypical liberal perspective on arriving at a plural judgment through, say, the Rawlsian overlapping consensus. Therefore, like Ackerly who offers us an alternative nonliberal perspective on democracy and democratic theory by using Confucian thought, Godrej offers us an alternative nonliberal perspective on plural judgment by using Gandhi’s notion of nonviolence as a civic virtue. Both perspectives are based on relational, emotive, and affective sensibilities that do not necessitate abstract understandings of equality, transparency, and mutuality, and in this way, diverge from the prototypical Western liberal debates on similar issues despite the parallels between Plato, Aristotle, and Kant.

Considered together, while challenging individualistic accounts of autonomy and subjectivity, all three works discussed above mentioned certain forms of relationalities that are different from the prototypical assumptions of the Western model. What does this common thread mean for political theory? If CPT’s very promise is the rehabilitative promise it has for bringing together the non-Western and Western ideas, thinkers, questions, and methodologies, how should this observation guide the futures of our political thinking?

My answer in this paper argues that we should make relationality more central in political theory despite the challenges this might involve regarding how we think about the self and other, and perhaps, even similarity and difference. At this point, I think delving into relational psychoanalytic models of subjectivity might be helpful. In her work on subjectivity and intentionality, while capturing the dynamics of personal and familial relationships in Lebanon, Suad Joseph (2012) turns to relationality, more specifically, relational psychoanalytic models of subjectivity as an alternative to the psychoanalytic models based on Freudian drive theory. According to Joseph, Stephen Mitchell’s “relational matrix”—which brings together the three dimensions of relationality that the previous relational models have separately studied (the self,

the other, and the space between the two)—captures the multiple, diverse, shifting attachments in the relationships in the Arab world more accurately than the dyad structure of the Freudian/Lacanian models. However, Joseph also adds that this approach should be considered in connection with Kenneth Gergen's relational framework because Mitchell only looks at the relationships between "separate units" and not between different "webs or networks of relationships" like the ones she observed in Lebanon.

According to Mitchell's categorization, the theories that define relationality *by design* (e.g., Sullivan 1953; Bowlby 1973, 1979) concentrate on the space between the self and the other, building on the premise that "people are constructed in such a fashion that they are inevitably and powerfully drawn together" (Mitchell 1988, 33). Secondly, the theories that explain relationality *by intent* (e.g., Fairbairn 1954) focus on the object, saying that we are related because "we crave relatedness." In this regard, relationality by intent provides "the manner in which various kinds of identifications and ties to other people serve as latticework, holding together one's personal world" (Mitchell 1988, 33). Lastly, the theories of relationality *by implication* (e.g., Kohut 1971, 1977) focus on the "self-pole of the relational field" as they treat "the establishment and preservation of a sense of identity and selfhood as the primary, superordinate human motivation, which also posits certain kinds of interpersonal relations, those crucial for reflexivity, as key psychological building blocks" (Mitchell 1988, 30)

Gergen's main critique of these relational approaches is that, although they stress the interrelatedness between different persons, they nevertheless rely on an assumption of a bounded being. Instead, Gergen calls for the need for thinking about the self as a relational multi-being that evolves through the coordination of different webs of relationships. In this manner, Gergen situates reason, agency, and memory as repeated iterations of action and co-action, or as performances that emerge from former relationships and are generative of new ones. According to Gergen, it is always through co-action that subjectivity is co-created and inclined "toward reliable or repeated forms of relationship" (Gergen 2009, 57-58). In this regard, Gergen's relational "multi-being" aims to reorder the sequencing of the Western definitions of autonomy, instead of categorically rejecting autonomy. Or, as Gergen states, "My attempt here is to reverse the order, and to treat what we take to be the individual units as derivative of relational process" (Gergen 2009, xxi). For Gergen, "independent persons do not come together to form relationships; from relationships the very possibility of an independent person emerges" (Gergen 2009, 38). Subjectivity is dynamically constituted in-between multiple discourses and relationships as a process of "coordination" where every conversation we have is "akin to playing a multidimensional game in which any move on part of any participant can be treated as a move in several other games" (Gergen 2009, 43). Since Gergen assumes subjectivity is an ongoing process always in motion, we can only observe how different relationships are coordinated at a given time and context.

In this regard, in their discussions introduced in this section on Islamism and communitarianism, Confucian democratic theory, and Gandhi's civic virtue of *ahimsa*, all three authors offered a glimpse of how this matrix is situated at different times and contexts and showed how different relations were coordinated. If we were to reverse to order and come to

the realization that “independent persons do not come together to form a relationship; from relationships the very possibility of independent persons emerges,” what does this mean for comparative analysis in political theory? (Gergen 2009, 38) If we go back to the puzzle of comparison regarding the requirement of distinction in CPT and rethink it from Gergen’s perspective, this might mean that the very assumption of the necessity of “distinct but interrelated” traditions stem from and conceptually relies upon a dualistic model of subjectivity, which has its roots on Freudian drive theory. That is, the very assumption of separation of selfhood and otherhood, and with it, the need for distinction for comparison is ultimately enrooted in the Western tradition itself. The problem with this reliance is that it locks the relationship at one point in time at a single matrix and determines the borders between West and non-West accordingly. By the time we pick and choose the distinct and separate units of comparison, we limit the relationship. According to Gergen, we should switch to order. We should look at the relationship where the boundaries between different traditions are always negotiated, interfused, and submerged into one another. Until we start our theorizing from that in-between space, in between no longer and not yet the relationship itself that determines the subject and the abject, we reproduce the dichotomies we were set to dismantle.

Difference and Otherness

Following my discussion on subjectivity, autonomy, and relationality in CPT, in this section, I will devote closer attention to otherness and difference in CPT and revisit its internal puzzle of critique by bringing in the Jennifer Nedelsky’s discussion on the power of evaluating and judging one’s own relations according to one’s core values, and not a pre-given set of values that can be fully determined by a singular discursive tradition—Western or non-Western. In this regard, my discussion extends directly from where I left off in the last section on subjectivity and autonomy. What does theory look like when it originates from the locus of difference and alterity? If political theory continues to rely on Western methodologies while engaging with the non-Western texts and traditions, can political theory ever be decolonized? Jenco asks a similar question: “How do we conduct cross-cultural inquiry without reproducing ethnocentric categories that prompt critique in the first place?” (Jenco 2007, 741)

There are two parts to the question of difference and otherness from a relational perspective: What does difference mean in a relational world? In response to this question, El Amine and Jenco provide interrelated but different routes for us to consider.

While criticizing arbitrary categories of West and East, El Amine asserts that the convincing responses to state oppression today in non-Western settings cannot solely be based on non-Western traditions without considering their relationality to the modern state. That is, for El Amine, “Confucian rituals will not work as a response to modern inequalities” without responding to “the network of concepts that accompanied the coming of the modern state: constitutionalism, law, rights, and democracy” (El Amine 2016, 107). This is not to say that El Amine assumes a shared universal acceptance of the Western model of rights or prescriptions of democracy. In contrast, El Amine suggests that there is an immanent interconnection between the Western and non-Western knowledges in contemporary times due to a shared

condition of the modern state structure. Due to this immanent interconnection, non-Western political theories share key themes with the Western liberal thought, such as the role of social welfare (Latin American model), good life (East Asian model), or religion (the Middle Eastern model) (El Amine 2016, 107-108).

By presupposing that the non-Western traditions necessarily present us a critique against Western tradition without continuities and similarities, accordingly El Amine, we mistakenly reduce the complex relationship between the East and the West to difference, and falsely equate difference to mean critique. From this understanding, the beginning and the end of comparative political theory becomes the extent to which it can provide an “alternative” and challenge foundational Western assumptions, with the limited room allocated to internal discussions of critique within those particular non-Western theories. The very assumption of a complete separation between the Western and the Eastern tradition of thought strategically denies the relationality of the development of ideas. Europe was never distinct and separate from the East and the ideas always travelled. Thus, the presupposition that equates modernity with Westernization, according to El Amine, denies the option of being modern without being Western.

Why is this important for political theory? According to El Amine, the growing subfield of comparative political theory, and its reliance on comparison as a method that dwells on differences and distinctions, has failed to account for the lines of continuities (El Amine 2016, 110). Focusing on “difference” assumes a referent to be different from, and in this case, that referent is still the Western categories of political thought. Using non-Western political thought only as a source of critique to challenge, rethink, and broaden Western political thought is for a Western audience, carried out by Western academics, and serves the Western political thought. According to El Amine, if CPT aims to challenge the East/West dichotomy, it should become more global. Responding to global questions requires global theorizing (El Amine 2016, 111).

The second part of my discussion on difference and otherness in CPT with respect to relationality posits the question: Can we rethink non-Western political theory by recognizing its other internal and external relationships aside from its otherness to the West? Or, as Ayşe Zarakol asks in her recent book, *Before the West*, “What if we did not assume that Asia was just a residual category, a variant of ‘non-Europe,’ but saw it as a space with its own particular history and sociopolitical dynamics, not defined only by encounters with European colonialism?” (Zarakol 2022, i).

Jenco's critique of postcolonial and comparative political theory targets the continued reliance on the Western discourse in these endeavours which were set to decentre and decolonize the Western hegemony in political theory—not perhaps reliance on the Western liberal discourse, but the reliance on the critiques of Western liberalism within the Western tradition, such as by using the works of poststructuralist thinkers. According to Jenco, to decolonize political theory more accurately, we should not just attend to culturally situated traditions of scholarship, but also refer to such ideas to ask new questions and to use new methodologies that are not limited

to the questions and methodologies in the Western thought. For this reason, Jenco examines the works of two Chinese classicists (Jenco 2007, 741-743). Jenco affirms that the Western and non-Western approaches should be distinct, and she believes it is possible to resituate and re-ground theory on difference alone.

Jenco's analysis of Kang and Wang introduces us to a dynamic legacy of exegesis and exegetical practices that offer us, in Jenco's words, "The viable methods for textual interpretation these Chinese scholars develop demonstrate how it is still possible for anyone to think within Chinese thought in a process perhaps complemented but not constituted by European categories of experience," but within the vocabularies and contexts they reside (Jenco 2007, 741). Here, Jenco's words are directed against the postcolonial theorist, Chakrabarty, who has suggested that we cannot avoid certain categories, concepts, and genealogies of thought enrooted in the intellectual traditions of Europe. Although the task Jenco's proposition is insightful, considering it being a response to Chakrabarty's claim to the contrary, it begs yet another question: Can the fact that we cannot "avoid" European heritage of thought be translated to a claim that suggests we cannot think within different traditions of thought, like within Chinese political thought, or Islamic thought? According to Jenco's opinion, it does.

According to Jenco, Kang and Wang "offer the possibility of launching critique within discourses other than those to which the researcher is already culturally accustomed" (Jenco 2007, 241-242)

Jenco argues "the fundamental question of cross-cultural theorizing then becomes how to undertake alternative modes of inquiry that produce and are informed by particular concerns and texts, not how to overcome intersubjective barriers to cultural understanding" (Jenco 2007, 742) Most notably, in her discussion of Wang, Jenco suggests that the relationship between knowledge and action is "not only contained in texts or conveyed through speech but also implicit within traditions of practices" (Jenco 2007, 751). Rather than the abstracted conversations or speech-based interventions of much contemporary cross-cultural theory, according to Jenco, Kang and Wang adopt hermeneutic stances that privilege human relationships, action, and the understandings these practices convey. For this reason, Jenco argues that merely reading and translating these texts may not be enough to understand them, "because such techniques cannot capture in words what is meant to be exemplary, action oriented, and impressionistic" (Jenco 2007, 751).

This Western presupposition does not apply to Kang and Wang whose texts have the power to morally transform its reader through their interpretation. For this reason, Jenco argues, there is the need for the theorist to immerse oneself fully in the texts including their methodologies, and practices and evaluate the implication of this tradition in its own light only. If theorizing otherness and alterity requires us to immerse ourselves into a particular tradition, as Jenco advises, then this brings out the limits of internal critique in CPT. From Jenco's perspective then the critique can only make sense if it comes from the tradition within which it is raised, without relying on Western critiques. Some extend this by claiming that critique itself is a

Western value (see for example Mahmood 2005). Some argue that if there is one value, we can consider cross-cultural, even universal, it is critique (see for example: Asad et al. 2009; Bucar 2011). However, what does this say about self-critique and self-constitutive dialogue with others? Can a tradition be properly analysed only from the tradition within which it emerges? In that case, can we also argue that the Western tradition of political thought should also be only criticized within its own tradition? Or does this principle selectively apply to non-Western theories due to the domination of the Western paradigm?

Jennifer Nedelsky's relational perspective on the need for evaluating our relationships and the necessity of comparison and internal critique while arriving at political judgments can offer us some insight. According to Nedelsky's version of relationality, humans as subjects of law and government are not best thought of as freestanding individuals who need protection from another (2011). Each individual is an embodied, affective relational being who is in basic ways constituted but not determined by nested networks of relationships. Rather than maintaining one's pre-existing relationships, Nedelsky's version of relationality builds on the power of evaluating them according to one's core values, which rests on judgment and self-critical reflection. In this way, Nedelsky argues, we can stop our relationships with unavoidable hierarchies of power from turning into "relationships of domination." Nedelsky's take on relationality is not just ethical; she is also interested in relationality's practical political, legal, social, and economic applications that can actually transform society more democratically. From this perspective, the problem is about limiting the webs of relationality between different persons, institutions, traditions, and locations into a singular hierarchal relation of power. In relationships of domination, the problem is about the assumed domination of one particular form of relationship as the only relationship option available. The problem is about reducing a relational matrix of relations into negation and otherization. Therefore, to challenge this problem, we should evaluate our relationships. Not all relations are good for us or push us toward self-betterment or necessary social transformation. To decide which relations serve us better we need critique.

Borrowing from Arendt's re-reading of Kantian theory of aesthetic judgment where the issue "at stake is neither a truth claim nor a mere subjective preference." Nedelsky suggests that all kinds of judgment (not just aesthetic judgment) require a valid, judging community (1997, 107). Community, in this regard, allows one to overcome the limitations of one's own location, experience, or history. But the act of judging is a double-edged sword since it also might require us to judge against that very same community for our judgment to be our own rather than an aggregate, a summary, or a compilation of views of others. Judgment is, therefore, an iterative, creative, continuous process that also requires periodic (internal as well as dialogic) re-assessments and critique (self-critique and critique of others) without which one might be locked in a certain judgment that may no longer hold valid. As Arendt argues "true judgment" requires "really thinking." Similarly, for Nedelsky, building and reassessing our own communities of judgment prevents our judgments to become judgmental. This is where the importance of evaluating our relationships comes from. Nedelsky imagines building our own communities of judgment beyond our given communities. According to Nedelsky the process involves continuous interpretation, comparison, and self-critical reflection of one's initial

thoughts, ideas, and opinions. In her words, “As I see it, the process involves an ongoing iteration of comparing one’s initial judgment with another perspective, considering whether to revise one’s initial judgment with another perspective, or so” (Nedelsky 1997, 41)

For Nedelsky (2011), the most practical purpose of a relational analysis is to clarify the nature of substantive disagreements and antagonisms. This is due to the relational and the reciprocal nature of judgment and autonomy that enables us to better understand and think of better ways to rethink, transform, or transcend the actual sources of our disagreements. This is not to say that a relational methodology makes disagreements and prejudices magically disappear. On the contrary, it might just shed a better light on the reasons why we disagree or help us to identify what is really at stake in these disagreements—especially radical political disagreements when the original cause of disagreement may long be forgotten or no longer valid, yet the relations of radical political dissent continue to dominate the relational matrix in a way that restricts any other. Our existent relations are not always fair, kind, and affective in themselves just because they are “relationality.” Relationality may guide us toward new possibilities and opportunities, but relationality does not always imply positive outcomes. Hence, self-reflective critique and choice matter. According to Nedelsky, there is a foundational difference between relationality and Western liberalism that treats individuals as radically independent rational agents. However, Nedelsky’s approach intersects with Anglo-American liberalism on the belief in the equal worth for every individual. Nedelsky values each individual’s distinctness, which cannot be subsumed under a particular wider identity including family, community, or the nation. Nedelsky is, therefore, critical of the universal values of liberalism, but she also finds it crucial to re-ground some of those values such as equality (central to feminism and other emancipatory movements) and impartiality (central to law and justice) from a relationship-centred perspective so that they can capture and respond better to the reality of human interactions.

Relationality is not just about existing relations. It does not require us to accept, confirm, and affirm our existent relations as they are without critique and evaluation. It does not require us to accept hierarchal relations of domination of which we are part or relations that are harmful to us. According to Nedelsky, relationality is about knowing the transformative power of our relations, and when possible, making our choices under the guidance of this relational awareness. Critique plays an important role in relationality, especially in setting the necessary conditions to avoid the problem of reducing our complex, embedded, multi-level relationships to a single relationship. From this light, if we reduce the relationality between “Western” and “non-Western” into a critique, then we limit the relational engagements between them to their presumed differences. According to Nedelsky’s perspective, therefore, this would not only misrepresent the nature of intercultural dialogue, but by limiting their relationality, it also restricts the creative and transformative ways in which we engage with both traditions and beyond.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed how comparison and relationality in relation decolonizing political theory, with a specific focus on the newly emerging field, comparative political theory,

which aims to bring non-Western political theories from the margins of political thought to the centre. I focused on two puzzles of comparison in comparative political theory: extent and depth of comparison in articulating non-Western political resources and the necessity of distinction for comparison as a method. In so doing, after providing a brief background on the historical processes and conditions that have led to the emergence and development of CPT, modernity and globalization, I reviewed some key works in CPT with specific emphasis on (1) autonomy and subjectivity, and (2) difference, alterity, otherhood. Based on Gergen's relational multi-being and Nedelsky's argument about evaluating relationships, I argued that comparison and relationality must be thought together to shed more light on how we can start to rethink some of the obstacles against the primary emphasis of CPT: decolonizing and decentring political theory by promoting deeper engagement non-Western texts, ideas, and thinkers from a pluralistic, multi-level perspective, beyond the fixed and fixated boundaries between the East and the West and without equating "comparative" with "non-Western" and "critique" with "difference." Given the increasingly more interdependent entanglements of the current global problems, this paper makes a case for rethinking comparison from a more relational and critical perspective.

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