



Comparative Political Philosophy

Studies
Under
the Upas Tree

Editors
Anthony J Parel
Ronald C Keith



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**COMPARATIVE
POLITICAL
PHILOSOPHY**

**Dedicated to the Memory of
Yusuf H. Umar
1948–1991**

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Preface

The study of substantive equivalence or parallelism in the development of different traditions of political philosophy is obviously a taxing intellectual exercise. Given the highly specialized training involved, few master one let alone several traditions. Also, university curriculum and scholarly research are in many cases rigidly compartmentalized along disciplinary and area study lines. If we put aside the Eurocentric tendency of contemporary philosophical inquiry, and look at non-European curriculum and research, there is no common understanding of the limits of 'Asia' or the 'Orient'. 'Area studies' focusing on tradition and modernity lack a strict international consistency as to which countries and cultures should be included in 'Asia' as opposed to 'Asia Minor', 'South Asia', 'East Asia', 'North-east Asia', 'Southeast Asia'. Can we even agree on what the available traditions are?

Then there is a veritable mine of disciplinary and methodological biases which stands in the way of any scholar who rises to the challenge of comparison. Historians may protest that events are inevitably discrete. Social scientists will counsel caution as in the study of politics there are no dependable empirical experiments to be repeated at will in the great laboratory of society. And, of course, there are the great debates over the nature of the disciplines themselves; for example, we need only recall how Anthropology was convulsed by the issue of 'cultural relativism'.

The seminar on comparative political philosophy held by the University of Calgary once again raised the issue of 'cultural relativism'. Realizing our own limitations and fully cognizant of the inevitable reservations of the scholarly community, we, nevertheless, consciously decided to focus on equivalences rather than differences. We did so with the sense of caution suggested in the Chinese proverb, 'feeling for rocks on the bottom so as to cross the river', *mozhe*

shitou guo he. In an elementary sense we are only just balancing ourselves on the first rock.

Parallel seminal concepts between traditions are indeed hard to establish but seminar participants often find that there are very inviting and suggestive comparisons to be made particularly in the light of the perilous transition between 'tradition' and 'modernity' and the commonality of human distress which characterizes such a transition.

The sub-title of this volume of essays focuses the reader's attention on the historical dilemma of cross-cultural understanding in the threatening context of modernity as conveyed in the legend of the Upas tree. Native Malaysians concocted an arrow poison which co-mingled strychnine and Upas latex. For a long time they withheld knowledge of this poisonous mix from the Europeans, and then they widely cultivated the myth that the tree was so toxic that it killed all that came near. The tree later underwent further metamorphosis as Gandhi took it as a symbol of the ruinous impact of modernity on the moral dimensions of social life.

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For permission to include K.J. Shah's article, 'Of *Artha* and the *Arthasastra*', in this volume, we thank the Indian Institute of Economic Growth and the Editor, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol. 15 (1-2), (1981).

Anthony J. Parel
Ronald C. Keith

1 The Comparative Study of Political Philosophy

Anthony J. Parel

Scholarship in the area of political philosophy has necessarily come to mean the study of modern western political philosophy, especially liberalism/utilitarianism and socialism. It is as if these are not just products of the *modern* West, but that they are products of universal reason itself. But no one can seriously doubt that these, in their origin and content, are products of modernity, which, in turn, is a product of modern western civilization. Comprising of studies of discrete political philosophies, this volume aims at stimulating interest in the comparative study of political philosophy.

There is mounting evidence which suggests that the claims of universality made by modern western political philosophy are being questioned by other cultures, or at least by the significant representatives of these cultures. Indeed, in the West itself the claims of modern western philosophy are being questioned by those who challenge the assumptions underlying modernity. Such critical inquiry makes the comparative study of political philosophies both opportune and intellectually satisfying.

But what is comparative political philosophy? Political philosophy, as Leo Strauss states, is the quest for 'knowledge' of the political phenomena—'knowledge' as distinct from 'opinion', or mere ideology or social science theory. Such 'knowledge' is the product, ultimately, of rational reflection on the data of *insight* and *experience*. Each culture has its own basic insights about what constitutes the good life

and the good regime; it has its own peculiar experiences which give institutional and intellectual expression to these insights. A political philosophy emerges as a result of the interaction between such insights and experiences.

But the emergence of political philosophy is conditioned by the cultural and linguistic traditions within which it occurs. And these traditions tend to produce, among other things, texts which are recognizably political, that is, texts which consciously attempt to develop a philosophic understanding of the theory and practice of governance. A proper study of such texts, taken in their historical and intellectual contexts, would reveal that they contain differences as well as similarities with respect to their key ideas and assumptions. Further reflection and analysis would reveal that the similarities are more significant than the differences and as such would reveal the presence of what Eric Voegelin has called the phenomenon of 'equivalences'. Thus, to take just a few examples from a lengthy list, the Aristotelian *politikos* and the Confucian *junzi*, Indian *dharma* and the pre-modern western notion of 'natural justice', the Islamic prophet-legislator and the Platonic philosopher-king, may usefully be considered as instances of 'equivalences'. Producing a long list is not our aim here; rather it is to suggest that it is the presence of such 'equivalences' that makes the comparative study of political philosophy possible. It follows that such a study is nothing other than the process, first, of identifying the 'equivalences', and second, of understanding their significance. Such 'equivalences', if and when they are found, would both deepen one's understanding of one's own tradition and engender understanding and respect for the traditions of others.

In the present volume we have selected four such traditions—western, Chinese, Indian, and the Islamic. The list is by no means exhaustive. We focus on these four political cultures as, in our opinion, they hold the key to the task of identifying points of equivalences. We limited ourselves to these for reasons of space and expertise available to us. Knowledge of the languages, histories, theologies, philosophies, and jurisprudences of more than one tradition is needed if one is to engage fruitfully in the comparative study of political philosophies. The task is formidable and we are conscious that our effort here is more pioneering than conclusive.

The strategy we have followed is to select significant representatives from each tradition, representatives who express their *insights* in the context of their own *experiences*. Thus from the pre-modern West we have taken Plato and Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas; from pre-modern China, Confucius; from India, Kautilya; and from Islam, Farabi. This is followed by a consideration of the philosophies of those who attempted either to update or subvert the tradition of their political philosophy. Thus from the West we have taken Hegel and Marx, who are of course subverters of the classical and medieval traditions of political thought in the West. The exclusion of other great political thinkers from the modern West, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Bentham, and Mill for example, may seem arbitrary and unfair. However their omission, in our present context (and only in that context), may be excused for the reason that Hegel and Marx bring to culmination an important strand in modern political thought, namely, the flowering of modernity, a process which these others had set in motion. For it is modernity that divides western political philosophy into the classical and medieval on the one hand, and the modern on the other. Internal differences within modern western political philosophy, however sharp they may be, are less significant than differences between modern western political philosophy and classical-medieval political philosophy taken as a whole.

But here a problem presents itself. We have noted that modernity has subverted the classical and medieval traditions of western political philosophy. If this is the case, surely it invites a further comment. For modernity challenges and attempts to subvert the political philosophies of other cultures as well. The reason is that modernity is opposed to tradition as such, not just the western tradition. For modernity is at home only in the present: it is a philosophy of the present—a moving target no doubt. Not only does modernity consider tradition as 'oppressive', 'authoritarian', and/or 'aristocratic', but it considers all tradition as devoid of *present* relevance. This conclusion is reached thanks to the philosophies of history, which are embraced as the pseudo metaphysics of modern western political thought. Thus modern political philosophy leads to the notion that philosophical thought regarding political phenomena should result in the creation of the universal homogeneous state or the universal classless society. Given this, no comparative study of political philosophy is possible within the framework of modern

western political philosophy. Comparisons are possible only between mutually recognized philosophical traditions. Comparative political philosophy, as we have already stressed, assumes the validity of cultural pluralism, and philosophical pluralism. Modern western political philosophy, on the other hand, is unable to recognize the validity of the pre-modern philosophical traditions, eastern as well as western.

Now it is the anti-traditional and universalistic pretensions or assumptions of modern western philosophy that a Gandhi or a Khomeini questions. Mao attempted to domesticate Marxism within the Chinese tradition, but the outcome is still rather in doubt.

Not that within the modern West itself modernity has gone unchallenged. Two significant tendencies can be noticed in contemporary western political philosophy: One attempts to criticize certain elements of modernity—domination for example—without seriously questioning the epistemological and ontological foundations of modernity itself. The philosophies of Habermas and Foucault belong to this category. They attempt to cure the patient, but their ministrations seem only to prolong the agony. In the meantime, modernity has begotten post-modernity, and only the future can tell what post-modernity is going to beget.

The other tendency is to criticize modernity where it is vulnerable, viz., in its inability to constitute itself into a tradition and its unwillingness or disinterest or arrogance to pay attention to non-western traditions in political philosophy. The philosophies, for example, of Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor, not to mention Eric Voegelin, may fall within this category. They attempt to look outside modernity itself, for at least some of the available insights. In other words, in the West too there is at present a school of thought that is attempting to update western political philosophy with reference to a tradition.

Though there is criticism of modernity in the West itself, it is not this element of western political philosophy that has had an impact on the Chinese, Indian, and Islamic political philosophies. What has influenced them is western modernity, mostly in the form of liberalism or socialism. Accordingly we see India, China, and Islam responding to modernity either in the manner of accepting it or, conversely, challenging it. We believe Gandhi, Mao, and Khomeini are the most significant political thinkers of their respective cultures.

Their basic focus was to update their particular political traditions in the light of the challenge from modernity—outcomes of such efforts were of course quite different from one another.

THE EXPERIENCES AND THE INSIGHTS OF THE WEST

As Barry Cooper argues in chapter 2, classical European political philosophy rests on the twin foundations of 'nature' and 'virtue'. Their rationale was established as a result of debates between the Sophists and the Socratics. The Socratic insight has been that humans have a nature which endures unchanged despite all the empirical changes humans undergo both as individuals and as members of a political community. And it is this nature which defines the permanent and important issues of political life. This insight led Aristotle to state that man is by nature a political animal and that it is through life in the polis that he can attain one of the essential purposes of living, namely, the attainment of social peace and happiness. This insight about human nature leads to the further insight that social peace and happiness are the outcome of virtue rather than the life dedicated to the production and consumption of goods and services. Thus a philosophy of human nature and a philosophy of virtue remain the permanent concerns of the original western political philosophy.

According to Aristotle a philosophy of human nature without the complement of an adequate political philosophy would remain incomplete.¹ Accordingly, Greek political philosophy focused on two fundamental points: on the regime and citizenship on the one hand, and on the civic virtues necessary for the realization of the aims of the regime and citizenship on the other. Thus the search for the meaning of justice, prudence, etc., became as important a part of political philosophy as the discussion of the nature of the constitution, and the causes of its rise and fall. In Plato's thought such enquiries gave rise to two basic theses. The first being that all actual regimes can be properly understood only in the light of the ideal regime. And second, that there is a parallelism between the order in the soul and the order in the city and that unless moral virtues find their complement in civic virtues, and vice versa, politics would not be able to make its humanizing contribution. Or as

Aristotle would put it, the student of politics must know somehow the facts of the soul: he must study the soul.² The overall aim of political philosophy is to enable the citizens 'to be of a certain character, viz., good and capable of noble acts'.³ However highly Plato and Aristotle prized the value of political life, they did not prize it as the highest perfection attainable by human beings. There was something higher still than political philosophy, political virtues, and social peace and happiness obtained through politics. Thus, *phronesis* (political wisdom), was different from *sophia* (theoretical wisdom), and more so inferior to it. Saying this, however, did not amount to undervaluing the significance of politics for them. It only gave the original European vision of politics its peculiar, intermediary position in the final scheme of things. That is to say, in the original European vision, politics was thought to elevate man from a mere brutish existence to a fully human condition; by the same token, politics was never thought to be capable of raising man to the highest perfection open to him. Aristotle expressed this idea when he wrote that man is neither a beast nor a god, but one who realizes his humanity in and through the polis.⁴

True, the grafting of the Biblical vision of man, particularly that expressed in the New Testament, to the original Hellenic vision, introduced a further modification in the European conception of political philosophy. If *sophia* was superior to *phronesis*, an Augustine or an Aquinas would add that both *sophia* and *phronesis* were inferior to divine wisdom as revealed in the incarnate Logos. But they would also add at once that this did not mean any essential undervaluing of the place of political philosophy in the general scheme of things. As Aquinas would put it, 'The city is, in fact, the most important thing constituted by human reason. For it is the object and final aim of all lesser communities. It is necessary therefore for the completeness of philosophy to institute a discipline which will study the city: and such a discipline is political philosophy.'⁵

If Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas articulated original insights of western political philosophy, and spoke of human nature, of virtue, and of grace, the innovators of this philosophy from the sixteenth century onwards articulated a different point of view. As Barry Cooper argues in chapter 3, they called into question the three concepts so central to the founders. Thus the concern for nature in humans was replaced by concern for history in and through which humans created themselves. Given this shift, it appeared to the