



# The Crisis of Comparative Research in Political Science and the Question of Cultural Difference.

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**Abstract :** This paper provides a broad overview of the discussions in the domain of comparative research in political science and the crisis that it faces with regards to providing an explanatory theoretical framework that accounts for the politics in the non-Western societies. For the last several decades, the question of a methodological approach to theorizing non-Western politics, without falling into the trap of Eurocentrism and Western Universalism has been discussed. The paper proposes that the issue is the result of assuming cultural invariance across human societies. The paper proposes the route of accounting for cultural difference and its impact on the understanding of the politics in different cultures, as a methodological solution for the crisis in the field.

**Keywords-** Comparative Research, Eurocentrism, Western Universalism, Cultural Invariance and Cultural difference.

## 1. Introduction:

Comparative research in the field of political science can be traced back to the times of Aristotle himself. Considered the father of political science, he is known for his comparative study of constitutions of several Greek city-states. He was followed by several scholars in ancient and medieval times. However, the modern roots of comparative research in political science can be traced back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century only. The field as it existed during the late 19<sup>th</sup> to first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was called comparative government. Comparative government as a field was limited to the analysis of the few European governments of the time. Freeman (1873) one of the pioneers in the field of comparative government, stated that comparative research would lead to the discovery of universal laws in politics through global investigation. However, the research was limited to Western Europe till the end of World War II. It was only after the War, as the process of decolonization began in a significant manner, the need to expand the scope of comparative analysis was felt by the scholars. It was Macridis (1955) who raised a full-blown criticism of the field of comparative government. To quote Macridis (1968) himself the traditional approach of the comparative government was, “essentially parochial, monographic, descriptive, bound to the West and particularly to Western Europe, excessively formalistic and legalistic, and insensitive to theory-building and theory-testing” p. 79. The criticism had significant implications for the comparative study of politics and led to a new beginning in the field.

## 2. Comparative Politics and its Theories:

Many scholars shared the discontent which Macridis voiced in his criticism, several of them wanted a complete renovation of the field. That is exactly what started after Macridis, Easton, Dahl, Almond, Verba etc., led to new ways of doing comparative research. This new field was soon called comparative politics. The focus shifted from the Western governments to the new independent nations in Asia and Africa. New technological and analytical tools were developed, empirical research was made the foundation. Gathering of large set of data from the fields spread across continents was the new way of comparing politics. However, the most important part about this new comparative research was its focus on theory building. The methods as well as ideas from several domains including those from anthropology, sociology, psychology etc., were brought in for this purpose. A set of theories was developed during the early phase of the research. The three most important theories were – political systems theory, political culture theory, and political development theory. These three formed a coherent theoretical framework which was used by the comparative political scientists for the next several years. The theoretical framework actually gave way to several different types of classificatory schema wherein the different systems were placed in an evolutionary development process. The evolutionary models always held the Western political systems of liberal democracy and the industrialized, modern and secular Western culture as its ideal. The newly independent nation-states from the non-West, were described as having parochial, diffused and diverse political culture and weaker, sometimes elite-dominated political systems which required further development to reach the standards of the West.

The recognition of the problems with the comparative analysis dawned slowly. The questions about the ideological and cultural bias of the domain were raised. Several scholars especially focused on developing the criticism of the ideological

bias of the theories of culture and development. This led to newer theories which are called Underdevelopment theories. On the other hand, the question about cultural bias had many more implications. While some of the questions turned into political movements, our focus in this paper is only on the theoretical questions that were raised. It was for the first time recognized that the cultural differences of the non-Western societies were important in contributing to the difference between the politics in the West and the non-West. It was also recognized that the cross-cultural comparative analysis has failed to consider the cultural difference leading to the analysis being a comparison only in the 'difference of degrees and not of kind' as Sartori (1970) points out. Sartori (1970) and Roberts (1972) both pointed out the fact that the use of concepts and their importance in theorization was not taken seriously by the comparative scholars, leading to the overstretching of conceptual apparatus and problems of theorization. As we will see, the problems of theorizing non-Western politics, especially in the context of cultural differences, were beginning to surface for the first time in the discussion of comparative politics.

### 3. Underdevelopment Theories and Colonialism:

The underdevelopment theories developed as an ideological critique of the development theories. These theories focused on the fact that colonialism was responsible for the underdevelopment of colonized societies. The theories focused on the extractive and exploitative nature of the colonial political system which led to socio-economic underdevelopment of colonized societies. Several ideas such as dependency and imperialism were developed in the analysis to account for the asymmetric power relations between the colonizing, developed West and the exploited underdeveloped non-West. These theories, however, focused more on the questions of political economics and were more descriptive in nature.

### 4. Said's Orientalism and the Post-Colonial Scholarship:

Edward Said's Orientalism (1978) for the first time synthesized the discussions on cultural asymmetry and its relationship to colonialism. Said showed that the entire discourse of the Orientalist scholarship pertained not to the Orient as it existed, but about the West's experience of Oriental cultures. Orient in this sense Said argued was an integral part of the Western material culture, a recurring image of the "other", a pale variant of the Western self, which was sustained and reproduced by the scholarly discourse and the institutional set-up of the West. Said successfully demonstrated that the discourse of the West about the Orient created cultural asymmetry, which was sustained especially by the colonialist project. Said's radical insights about the nature of Western discourse on the Orient not being veridical raised several questions about the theorizing of the non-Western societies in the social scientific domains. However, even though Said provided us with a vantage point to look at the Western discourse about other cultures, it did not lead him to any methodological program to rethink the social scientific domain, rather he believed that the social sciences themselves would lead to an alternative discourse on the issue.

The post-colonial scholarship which focused on the Saidian insights about the Orientalism, focused on the colonial encounters and how these encounters led to "construction" of the post-colonial world where the colonial discourse still continues to be reproduced. The question of decolonizing the social sciences was taken by several scholars. However, the post-colonial scholarship did not provide any alternative theoretical framework for the decolonization of the social sciences. Rather, the focus of the post-colonial scholarship remained linked to the reform of the existing social sciences. The problem with not developing a proper methodological framework has led to the scholarship facing a major crisis, a cul-de-sac.

### 5. Comparative Political Theory:

While the problems of cultural asymmetry and decolonizing social science had already made an impact on the nature of enquiry and theorizing in social scientific domain, the field of comparative research in political science was lacking in the discussions. The domain of comparative politics received a setback due to the aforementioned criticism and could not appropriately respond to the new demands. On the other hand, few pioneering scholars in the field of political theory were trying to address the questions of cultural asymmetry in their own field. "Comparative Political Theory" as a domain began with questioning the absence of non-Western political thinkers in the domain of political theory. The idea was to introduce the non-Western political thinkers and thought to the domain of political theory so as to address the asymmetry in the domain. However, this in itself was not enough, as several questions about the methodological and theoretical framework used to approach and explain the non-Western political thought needed to be answered. The scholars in this new domain have tried to make an honest effort to find an appropriate methodological approach. However, as we will see from the debate in the field, there has not been any clear solution to the problem of methodology.

Dallmayr (2004), one of the pioneers in the field of comparative political theory, took the methodological approach of hermeneutical dialogue between cultures as the best course to address the issues at hand. He derived this approach from the combination of the works of early 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers like Gadamer as well as from the thinkers from the field of comparative philosophy. Dallmayr's main idea was to address the problem of "Eurocentrism" as well as avoid the issues "ethnocentric chauvinism", "faceless universalism" and "the dead-ends of Occidentalism and Orientalism". Dallmayr wanted to address the issues of cultural clashes as well as globalization through a balanced approach. He aspired to increase the horizon of the West and to create a possibility for genuine universalism.

However, several scholars have shown how the methodological problems that Dallmayr wants to address emerge in his methodological approach. Shogimen (2016) shows how the idea of dialogue as a method is distinctly unique to and developed by European culture. He also shows how the Japanese historical experience does not allow for a dialogical method of approach the intellectual history. Even more severe criticism of Dallmayr and his methodological approach is shown by Jordan and Nederman wherein they argue that "Dallmayr takes the notion of genuine universality, namely, to the state of communicative democracy and a "just global peace." He hints that the goal of comparative political theorizing is theoretical or ideological convergence among a multitude of thinkers, participating in a single purposeful dialogue, the ultimate product of which is building synonymy rather than a genuine tolerant peace or deep respect for divergent

traditions. As John Headley has argued, a core feature of Western thought "is a universalizing principle directed toward the construction of Humanity as idea and fact." Dallmayr's "dialogical model," founded on elements of twentieth-century Western philosophy, seems to have slipped this Occidental presumption into its agenda. In which case, to follow Bevir's understanding of meaning, it appears that Dallmayr has appropriated the factually non-western meanings intended in a text and recast them in western clothing, thus altering profoundly the meanings in the origin." p. 631. Thus, while Dallmayr wants to address the issue of Eurocentrism, his own methodological approach leads to the reappearance of the problems associated with Eurocentrism.

March (2009) has raised questions about the comparative nature of the new domain. He states that a mere study of non-Western political thinkers should not be called as comparative political theory and it is important that the comparative political theory should focus on providing a critical questioning of the Western normative beliefs through the cross cultural enquiry, "Exploring the normative implications for us (the west) of principled value-conflict is an appropriate task of engaged political theory and could be made the centrepiece of the comparative political theory project. Thus, comparative political theory may be conceived of as "justificatory" comparative political theory. A postcolonial argument that uses epistemically distinct, non-Western experiences, perspectives, or views to show Westerners that they ought to change their minds about their present normative commitments or beliefs is what else if not a form of justificatory comparative political theory?" p. 560. However, as Godrej (2009 a) points out, such a way of doing comparative political theory has many pitfalls including that of not recognizing the issue of how the political theory and its methods of theorizing are culturally dominated by the West.

Jenco (2007), points out that both post-colonial critique and Comparative Political Theory have called into question the "universal" applicability of Western liberal political norms, but their critiques are drawn most often from competing Western discourses (e.g., poststructuralism) rather than from the culturally diverse traditions of scholarship whose ideas they examine. She states that the theorists should derive the methods to study the texts from the scholarly traditions to which they belong. Godrej (2009 b) following from Jenco's argument, also asks the scholars to immerse themselves in the lived traditions and articulate their ideas after they have undergone the experiential transformation which informs them of adherents' perspectives about the text. This, however, requires substantial amounts of linguistic, theoretical and ethnographic skills to first immerse and then translate the experience of the textual tradition to the audience who are unfamiliar about it. Godrej (2009 b) also points out that the scholar should undergo a substantial amount of tension in converting and articulating the non-Western experience into a theoretical expression, "Certainly we have to be sensitive to the risk that some subtleties of existential "truth" may be lost in the attempt to make ideas speak to us, and that the project of representing them to outsiders carries both epistemic and political baggage. The alternative, however, is to continue with a political theory in which ideas from non-Western civilizations remain contained within their own traditions, speaking only to and for their adherents." p. 160.

Thus, as one can see the comparative political theory faces several challenges in trying to address the issues that it identifies as central to its investigations. It is not very clear to the comparative theorists how to theorize the cultural differences with respect to non-Western culture while not really leading to the problems of orientalism, Eurocentrism or that of distorting the ideas of the non-Western cultures.

## 6. Conclusion –

The problem that the comparative research in political science in trying to explain both non-Western politics as well as non-Western political thought, tells us that the issues pertaining to cultural difference are at the center of discussion. However, comparative research in political science even after recognizing the issue has unable to provide a methodological solution to compare, contrast and theorize the cultural differences in a manner in which the Western cultural frameworks do not re-create the cultural asymmetry pointed out by Said (1978) and others. However, Balagangadhara (2005, 2012, 2022) has provided a general methodological framework for theorizing cultural differences without leading to the issue of cultural asymmetry. If one takes Balagangadhara's claims, the simple problem with the comparative research in the field of political science is that it assumes cultural invariance of the notion of politics (ideas, institutions and practices) across cultures. Even when cultural difference is accounted a basic level of similarity in terms of comparability of concepts, institutions and practices is assumed and only then is the possibility of comparative research realized. In assuming such an invariance or similarity, comparative research reproduces the Western experience of other cultures, as it is the only culture that has provided a framework of comparing the cultures. This is exactly the reason why Balagangadhara (2022) points out that, if one has to take the notion of cultural difference seriously then one will have to assume that cultures do not differ similarly, rather, they differ differently.

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