

Theories and levels of generalization in comparative political science

Plan

- What is comparative political theory?
- Conceptualization, quantification and classification.
- The ladder of abstraction.

What is comparative political theory?

- There is no single such thing as political theory.
- “Political theory” is the name given within the academy to a number of different types of intellectual activities, some of them mutually hostile, which have in common only the fact that they do not aim at empirical explanation or prediction and instead deal with the realms of ideas, concepts, texts, values, and norms.

- 1. Normative political philosophy in search of justifiable norms, beliefs, policies, or institutions, whether analytic, critical, or historical-traditional;5
- 2. Critical analysis and interpretation, which in some way or another aims at exposing the hidden, denied, unrecognized, or unacknowledged underneath the visible, the apparent, or the hegemonic;
- 3. The history of political thought, including intellectual history, Begriffsgeschichte, and the study of important thinkers;
- 4. Conceptual analysis at the intersection of philosophy, intellectual history, and social science;
- 5. The study of forms of political thought and speech at the intersection of discourse analysis, linguistics, social science, psychology, speech-act theory, and the study of political ideologies.

- The question of whether political theory can or ought to be in some meaningful and interesting way comparative will then depend very much on what kind of activity or activities are thought to be the task of political theory.

Political Theory and Comparison

- Specific common object of inquiry
- Distinction

The Comparative Political Theory Project. Five Themes

- epistemic,
- global-democratic,
- critical-transformative,
- explanatory-interpretative,
- and the rehabilitative

Series of theses that reveal what it would mean for engaged political theory to be comparative

- Comparative political theory ought to be distinguishable from anthropology and area studies;
- If the interest in non-Western political thought is grounded in the belief that we might have something to learn about political and social life from writers outside the Western canon, then it becomes less clear what is being compared;
- If the interest in non-Western political thought is merely to decenter the canon or to frame cross-cultural dialogue, but without rigorous epistemic or normative standards, then it might be regarded as zoological, that is, a civic act rather than a theoretical or philosophical one.
- Clearly, our engaged comparative interest in non-Western political thought arises largely out of a concern with (political) value-conflict.
- Comparative political theory will likely have a special and predominant interest in religious doctrine and political thought.

Series of theses that reveal what it would mean for engaged political theory to be comparative

- We must think that we are studying a semiautonomous application of reason (which includes the interpretation of revelation) in order to provide guidance (including critique) on political and social life.
- The primary criterion for identifying texts and authors would seem to be their orthodoxy or centrality: they must either, for some reason, be authoritative themselves for adherents of that tradition, or they must represent a particularly good synthesis, elaboration, or statement of the value-conflict in question.
- Comparative political theory involves comparing responses to specific questions or problems of importance.
- It is unlikely that as political theorists we will only be interested in exposing irreconcilable value-conflicts.
- Exploring the normative implications for us of principled value-conflict is an appropriate task of engaged political theory and could be made the centerpiece of the comparative political theory project. Thus, comparative political theory may be conceived of as “justificatory” comparative political theory.

Conceptualization, quantification and classification

- Concept formation stands prior to quantification. The process of thinking inevitably begins with a qualitative (natural) language.
- The quantification of political science consists of (a) attaching numerical values to items (pure and simple measurement), (b) using numbers to indicate the rank order of items (ordinal scales) and (c) measuring differences or distances among items (interval scales);
- Logic of classification building. Classes are required to be mutually exclusive, i.e., class concepts represent characteristics which the object under consideration must either have or lack. Two items being compared must belong first to the same class, and either have or not have an attribute; and only if they have it, the two items can be matched in terms of which has it more or less. Hence the logic of gradation belongs to the logic of classification. More precisely put, the switch from classification to gradation basically consists of replacing the signs "same-different" with the signs "same greater-lesser," i.e., consists of introducing a quantitative differentiation within a qualitative sameness (of attributes).

The ladder of abstraction

TABLE 1. LADDER OF ABSTRACTION

Levels of Abstraction	Major Comparative Scope and Purpose	Logical and Empirical Properties of Concepts
image 12 HL: <i>High Level Categories</i> Universal conceptualizations	Cross-area comparisons among heterogeneous contexts (global theory)	Maximal extension Minimal intension Definition by negation
ML: <i>Medium Level Categories</i> General conceptualizations and taxonomies	Intra-area comparisons among relatively homogeneous contexts (middle range theory)	Balance of denotation with connotation Definition by analysis, i.e. per genus et differentiam
LL: <i>Low Level Categories</i> Configurative conceptualizations	Country by country analysis (narrow-gauge theory)	Maximal intension Minimal extension Contextual definition