

***Political Theory: A Global and Comparative Approach* (SAGE, forthcoming 2025),
By Leigh Jenco (LSE), Paulina Ochoa Espejo (University of Virginia) and Murad Idris
(University of Michigan)**

These abstracts and chapters are prepared for the presentation at the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, University of Tokyo (April 26, 2024)

The circulated texts and abstracts are preliminary, unedited, drafts. Comments welcome!

OVERVIEW of the BOOK

This book is a concise introduction to the key topics of political theory for undergraduate students, from a much-needed global and comparative perspective.

Introductory courses to Political Theory have traditionally been taught as a chronological survey of canonical authors (as by Sabine's *History of Political Theory*, Strauss' and Cropsey's *History of Political Philosophy* or Klosko's *History of Political Theory*); or as a survey of a series of important concepts and ideologies (Bellamy and Mason's *Political Concepts*; Hoffman and Graham's, or Bird's, *Introduction to Political Philosophy*.) These approaches differ in how they present political theory to students; some, like Shapiro (*Moral Foundations of Politics*), and Wolff and Rosen (*Political Thought*), have sought to blend them. But all focus on the main concerns of politics in Europe and North America. In the last 20 years, political theory has asked repeatedly how "the tradition of Western Political Thought should understand itself in relation to non-Western perspectives" (White and Moon, *What is Political Theory?*, 2004, vii), and a consensus has emerged on the need to "deparochialize" political theory (Williams, 2020). However, introductory texts still present "other traditions" as exotic add-ons to the traditional Eurocentric corpus.

This book offers a different approach that breaks with this framing of "the West and its 'others.'" Rather than try to represent a series of geographically coded "traditions" such as "Western Thought", "Chinese thought" or "African philosophy," we argue for what we call the "tag" model of connectivity: like a hashtag in social media, certain themes and dilemmas can bring together political ideas, texts, and thinkers across geographical spaces and times—even those not in historical conversation with each other. These themes can be juxtaposed across space and time to create new discussions and shed new light on key questions of political life. In making these connections, we relate isolated conversations directly to the goals and methods of canonical and contemporary political theory in other places, demonstrating the broader value of a globally-inclusive approach to political thought, but avoiding the cultural essentialism that sometimes results from well-meaning attempts at inclusion.

Each chapter deals with a central theme in political thought, identifying two or three key interventions made by thinkers in different times and places. It then shows how these interventions resonate—or not—across communities, traditions, and individuals within and beyond Euro-American political theory.

1. Introduction

What is (Global and Comparative) Political Theory?

Leigh Jenco and Paulina Ochoa Espejo

This chapter attempts to explain what political theory is, and why it should matter to undergraduate students. So many of the urgent problems of our time—from climate change, to social activism, to inequalities of race, gender and class—find expression in political theory. Political theory presents us with sets of concepts and systems of ideas that both explain and inform political action. These theories are also used to evaluate and judge what ought to happen in political life. Many of these urgent problems are subsumed under a handful of abstract formulations that are often labeled “universal” or “perennial” problems of political life. Yet, these formulations come almost exclusively from a white, male, Euro-American set of thinkers and texts. This chapter identifies some of the pitfalls of this approach, primarily its false universalism. It shows that this narrow approach to political theory is not perennial and universal: in fact, it is a relatively new and narrow academic endeavor. The chapter opens the approach to other questions posed rigorously in a huge variety of places, contexts, and time periods. We consider the challenges of taking account of these global and trans-historical contributions, and propose a “tag” approach as a means of drawing attention to unexpected connections between such questions and ideas.

2. Chapter 3

Origin Stories

Leigh Jenco and Paulina Ochoa Espejo

Where did the political community come from? And what do the stories we tell about the origins and formation of political communities reveal about political life? In this chapter we examine two different sorts of stories, “cosmogonies,” which situates human society as one entity in a much broader cosmos; and “foundation stories,” which focus on the specific ways in which humans should organize themselves and establish political authority. In the first part we contrast the Judeo-Christian *Genesis*, with the Maya K’iche’ *Popol Vuh*, and with the early Chinese text *Dao De Jing*. In the second, we turn to Rousseau’s origin stories. We examine how his State of Nature and Social Contract map on to Cosmogonies and Foundation Stories, and see how these two kinds of stories intersected with each other, and suggest that these two kinds of stories draw our attention to new questions about political life, including what kind of political order is justified, and whether that order should be centered on human needs or on a broader picture of the natural world.