

Introduction – What is political theory?

‘What is political theory?’ feels like the most banal and predictable way to start a textbook. But actually, it is exciting, controversial and decolonial. How?

Let’s start with a *definition*. Jonathan Floyd describes political theorising as having three foundational questions: 1) How should we live? 2) Why should we live that way and not another? and 3) Is it even possible to provide a convincing answer – one that we can all agree on – to 1? (2017, p. 46).

The first consequence of this question is that political theory is potentially a subject of ‘rabbit holes’ or diversions. Imagine if you were asked to find problems with this definition, and you were asked to find a problem as early on in the definition as you could. Like in a gameshow, where would you press the buzzer to interrupt?

You could buzz in right at the beginning, at number one, on the ‘we’ or even the ‘should’. ‘Should’ tells us political theory is, in part, a subject that tries to establish right and wrong, through reflection, not divine command. This is a subject for theorising morality – that is a big task. ‘We’ raises questions over who exactly is included, and importantly, who is not. There have been many ideas on how this is decided. You could spend your entire life thinking about citizenship: what it is and how it works. Or you could focus on those that do not qualify: theories of ‘othering’ examine how certain groups in society are overlooked, or even framed as a threat.

You could buzz in at number 2, on ‘why’. What is the point of thinking about these questions when that is not how societies are organised in ‘real life’? People in power make decisions about how we should live. Never in actual history, has everyone got together and mutually collaborated on an ethical answer. Politics is about power, so we should study power.

You could hold off till the end, because the pay-off here is big. If you buzz in on ‘agree’ there is a lot to talk about. Politics is about perspective. Is the aim to provide a ‘convincing answer’ for everyone, everywhere, regardless of gender, sexuality, race, culture, capability and so on? To look for a universal response about how we should live together is to transcend geographical and cultural boundaries. The history of colonialism is littered with people who thought they had the right answer and so tried to impose it – from ‘civilisation’ narratives to ideas on political order. On the other hand, if we withdraw from the idea that there could be a right way to live, or at least better ways than others, then everything becomes culturally/

generationally relative and we cannot say something is wrong, when we think it is. So, potentially, we cannot take a moral stand against *anything*.

In a few short paragraphs, I think, a definition has become explosive. But we are only just getting started.

This definition says nothing about *format* – another boring word that is actually, *existential* to the subject, and how we perceive truth and reality. Seriously. Consider this. If these three questions are what describe the subject, then *how* we do it, and *what* we consider political theory to be, is not defined by conventional formats, such as monographs, journal articles or papers. Similarly, it is not limited to a certain style of writing or tone.

Does this mean that political theory can be anything? A song, a fable, an Indigenous folk-story? Perhaps these things should be considered.

But surely, we need standards of rigour – analysis, peer review, evidence, statistics, data, a scientific worldview – these are all things that make something more trustworthy. They are academic criteria. Without these, anything goes, including bad journalism, fake news and post-truths.

But if those academic standards emerged and solidified during a time and place where the only people doing political theory were white, privileged, men, then does that mean that the very standards with which we exclude non-conventional sources are, as Patricia Hill Collins describes it in *Black Feminist Thought*, views of the world from ‘white male epistemologies’ (2000 [1990], p. 267)?

But if we decide to incorporate some non-conventional sources, we may end up evaluating them by such external standards anyway.

Format is boring, eh?

Decolonising + Diversifying + Canonical = Disruptive Canonical Approach

To *decolonise* a subject is to consider how it has been affected by colonial viewpoints or practises and try to correct that – for example, if political theory has been Eurocentric, we subsequently try to expand beyond European thinkers, or the European “canon”. But this is not a finished project. This is a *decolonising* book, not a *decolonised* one. What institutions and practices are colonial are still being discussed and debated. Decolonisation is a process *currently happening*. Therefore, no book can claim to have finished it. *Experimentation* is the key point here. Political theory is ever changing and evolving.

This book is not limited to decolonisation though, but a wider diversification of political theory. For example, queer theory involves claims that society is built around heteronormative norms, and why that has caused certain harms. *Diversification* as well as *decolonisation* influences this book. Some sources that are selected may well therefore be lesser known than ones that are part of the conventional canon.

This book is still *canonical*, because canonical ideas matter, and they still shape the world today. I do not *replace* key political thinkers but compare them with thinkers from more diverse schools of thought.

This book, being decolonising, diversifying and canonical, therefore takes a *disruptive canonical approach*. It is influenced by comparative political theory which looks at ideas across cultures and compares them. This is difficult, because it risks evaluating ideas from ‘that other culture’ with the standards of our own. Further, where this approach adds breadth, it risks losing depth. So, this is not a book *in* comparative political theory. It recognises comparative political theory as a relative to political theory, but it is still political theory. This means that it is still a book of predominantly ‘Western’ political thought (with disruptions), rather than say, Chinese or Arab political thought.

Floyd’s definition informs this book’s approach because it does not require that we study the subject chronologically. To study the subject chronologically is a valid and enriching approach. Historical context is important, and we can see how ideas develop over time. From the moment Socrates asked what justice was (Plato, 2003 [circa 380BC]), a conversation started over the ages, where time and place impact the answers.

However, when we teach political theory chronologically all of the newer, disruptive theory tends to come at the end of a module, tagged on at the end in week 24, like an afterthought. What I wanted to do with this book is put disruptive ideas at the centre and beginning of political theory, and therefore be running throughout. In Chapter 1, for example, the critique that ideas on human nature have been male-centric, occurs within discussions on human nature, rather than being put in a separate chapter on feminism. Of course, something has to go at the end of a book, but that is because they are separate topics, like climate change or AI, and not because they are different views on an earlier topic.

There will be more disruption in some chapters than others because some ideas have not been disrupted as much. Or, for the sake of depth, I had to make difficult choices. Occasionally, I consider a ‘big idea’ as a collective one – where we consider something in the context of more than one thinker. Doing this can also potentially be decolonising – moving away from the idea that there is one single genius. Sometimes an idea requires a bit more breadth so at other times the conventional method, to go into more complexity with one thinker, is required. This can emphasise figures that deserve emphasis.

I am also not the font of all knowledge. I am therefore not saying this book is a definitive canon for all time. As I said before, *decolonising (and diversifying)*, not *decolonised (or diversified)*.

The downside of clustering thinkers together based on the topic or concept they are talking about rather than chronologically can feel dislocating. For example, reading about Kant’s categorical imperatives in the same chapter as Patricia Hill Collins’ *Black Feminist Thought* needs to be justified. Each chapter therefore includes a small section on *why* the thinkers present were selected. Where necessary I have included

historical context about the theorists in each chapter so the reader can consider how that has impacted the ideas they are reading about.

On a few occasions, some political thinkers turn up in more than one chapter. This could be for a couple of reasons. First, it could be that their ideas are quite a lot to take in, in one go. One example of this is Thomas Hobbes. His ideas on political legitimacy (Chapter 8) are inseparable from his ideas on human nature (Chapter 1), and both have been too influential to pick one to feature and not another. It would leave a significant gap in your political theory knowledge. Equally, if they were to feature in the same chapter – let's say on political legitimacy – they would take up too much space and exclude other thinkers. But if I were to put him in the chapter on human nature, we would be pulled off topic when it came to his ideas on political legitimacy.

Consequently, I decided to include the human nature arguments, specifically his state of nature theory, in the human nature section, and provide a short review of that when discussing his social contract theory in Chapter 8 (1985 [1651]).

Second, a thinker may turn up more than once, because they are too significant to replace from either topic. For instance, Michel Foucault is a foundational thinker for queer theory (Chapter 6), but to write a chapter on Crime, Security and Punishment (Chapter 9) without Foucault would be complacent.

In other situations, canonical thinkers feature, but to complement and centre the decolonial perspective, rather than the other way around, which so far in the history of political theory textbooks, has tended to be the default approach. Sometimes that is the correct approach, but where possible, I have tried to disrupt this. Two examples are the inclusion of Kant's 'categorical imperatives' (1998 [1785], pp. 30–39) *within* a discussion of Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Epistemology* (2000 [1990]), or Karl Marx's ideas on the revolutionary class (2010 [1848]) *within* Franz Fanon's ideas on the revolutionary power of the colonised (1986 [1952]).

However, I think all of this is a feature of the book, not a bug. It reminds us that there are many overlapping conversations in political theory, and the topics we study, in actuality, are all connected. This is partly because they all stem from the same three questions: 1) How should we live? 2) Why should we live that way and not another? and 3) Is it even possible to provide a convincing answer – one that we can all agree on – to 1? (2017, p. 46).

Language and style

In this section, we have a quick look at how we talk about and write political theory.

The matter of discourse

Let's talk about discourse. German philosopher Jurgen Habermas wrote about this with the idea of *Discourse Ethics* (2001). It may seem strange to consider how we

talk about big ideas to be a big idea itself, but when we think about social media today, and how people communicate or have political discussions, it is perhaps a very important idea. Habermas thought we approach debate the wrong way around – often, the goal is to win or persuade our ‘opponent’. But he tried to reframe the idea of ‘losing’ an argument. Having your mind changed is actually *your* moment, not the ‘victors’. This is because in that moment you decide to alter your opinion you are free. You are showing you are not chained to ideology, identity or ego. You are opening your mind to new possibilities. This is exciting and full of opportunities. The problem is, we forget this in the cut and thrust of debate.

Habermas thought this leads to distorted communication. Maybe our opponent is more respected by others or wields a certain privilege, making them appear more convincing. Perhaps you get anxious in discussion and cannot articulate yourself as well as you would like. But how do we solve this?

First, we need to make sure we clarify the concepts we are using, to ensure full understanding between us. Second, we need to try and be as clear as possible. As human beings, Habermas thinks we want to communicate, we just need to practise. This seems to translate into a speech ethic – be calm, concise, polite and non-aggressive – because, for instance, if we shout, it can intimidate our interlocutor. To do so would be exercising power and would distort communication; distort our collaborative theorising. *Discourse Ethics* encourages us to foster an environment of debate, not aggression; a search for truth, not ‘my side vs your side’. We would all want to be in a seminar like this. Wouldn’t we want politicians to practise this, rather than the sniping we generally see on TV? Wouldn’t it make society, and our politics, better? But perhaps there is a problem here. We may think that a calm and rational approach to debate is to abstract our own investment or reason for the debate, which could be linked to our identity.

Bell hooks was a very famous sociologist, yet sometimes, she would have articles she submitted to journals rejected. The reason – because she had used ‘slang’ or in her own words, ‘Black vernacular’ in places she felt were appropriate, where it communicated more (1994, p. 175). The question then becomes, what is considered superior about neutral, academic language? Let’s imagine this as a dialogue between bell hooks and these reviewers, to get to the point:

- Reviewer: This is a great article! But ... it’s strange, there’s a few moments where you use non-academic language ... like, slang, to get your point across. Please use proper academic English.
- bell hooks: Why can’t I use Black vernacular when writing about theory?
- Reviewer: Because it’s not academic, and because some of our readers wouldn’t understand it.
- bell hooks: Why isn’t it academic? Are the ideas not good?
- Reviewer: No, they’re great! We just need you to correct the slang before we publish it. It’s not academic English.

One implication is academic language is superior, and a superior vehicle for expressing intellectual and intelligent ideas. The criticism is this limits political theory and what we consider political theory to be. It excludes many potential sources of political theory, such as stories and folklore. It may seem strange to include such things, but let's remember Floyd's definition: this definition is about *what* we study, not *how we say it*. Perhaps to impose academic, neutral language, is to confuse one particular *format* of political theory, with *content*.

Talking in an American context, hooks reminds us that slaves had to learn the slavemaster's language to survive, and disrupting rigid grammar rules was important; using English in a manner that 'ruptured standard usage and meaning', took some level of ownership over the 'oppressor's language' (1994, p. 170). When we say, 'you cannot use that because it isn't academic enough', we undermine this. We banish it from a space that is supposed to be the height of intellectual debate.

But of course, is not the point of academic language to ensure that we all understand? That concepts are clarified, as Habermas wants? Allowing people to use their own dialects could cause confusion and distort communication. hooks considers this, and claims that this shows how native speakers dominate the classroom. She encourages them to consider moments of confusion as chances to learn another's language. To demand full understanding is a kind of mastery – effectively saying, speak my language, I am not learning yours. Hooks thinks this discourages a more mutual learning approach, which is actually the way to mitigate power within debate.

Habermas thinks he is taking power out of the conversation by suggesting clarity, but hooks argues in seeking a detached view you leave out and silence vital perspectives. This book tries to reconcile these contrasting views of discourse. It is written in a fairly informal style – it does not over rely on jargon but seeks to explain, demystify or normalise it when necessary – and it recognises that sometimes an informal register is more engaging. It also acknowledges hooks' point: what we consider 'proper' academic language can be exclusive – sometimes this is good because academic language can mean accurate language, but at other times, when it is neutralising a political thought that was not meant to be neutralised, it is in fact inaccurate to the meaning and intent.

These different views on discourse, I think, reflect wider, public discourse on social media, televised debates, and so on. You may think the way to good discourse is to undistort communication, in which case the goal is to find a resolution. Or you may think the best route is to allow for diverse forms of communication and even outburst, in which case the goal becomes encouraging empathy. Perhaps we can do both.

Quotations

One final point on the matter of language and style – quotations. This book uses direct citations from the sources or thinkers it is talking about. This is a pedagogical choice. Essays and written assignments require quotations to evidence some engagement with

primary texts. A textbook chapter is not an essay, but to write it only in a summary style without any direct citations, I think, is misleading for anyone who will be doing a written assignment. So, although I am not writing essays or papers in this book, I think it is important to show good practice for you, if you are.

As a result, language comes up again, particularly with older texts in that the language that many political thinkers used (and sometimes continue to use) is very gendered. *He* is the default. I have decided to replicate citations word for word, rather than change the language myself, for two reasons. First, because it would be misleading – if you did this in your own assignments, until (if) this becomes common practice, you might be marked down for inaccuracy. Second, because I think it adds to the context. I think it is important we recognise when gendered language was occurring, why and when it stopped. Removing that context gives us a false view of the people we are studying and the context to their ‘big ideas’.

SAGE Sample Content

How to use this book

Below is a template layout of each chapter to familiarise you with how it works. There are pedagogical features to help your learning and each chapter is designed to support the diversification of political theory.

Chapter Title

Learning outcomes

These will usually be three. Sometimes they will be phrased as questions, because the learning outcome is to question something!

Overview

The overviews will give a brief preview of each 'big idea' in the chapter, as well as the developments/criticisms section. They will also include a justification for choices made in the chapter. For example, why a certain thinker features, or why there is more than one thinker for one big idea.

Big idea 1

A "big idea" is a major theory that has shaped the world in some way – perhaps it has affected the way we think or the way we view the world, or perhaps it has even impacted the very structure of society. Sometimes a big idea will be a single thinker, sometimes more, and sometimes a collective. This is part of the diversifying approach this book takes.

There are quote boxes embedded in these sections. They are part of the narrative, but they are boxed to make them easier to find when revising or reviewing, and to break up the text a bit.

Each section has sub-headings to help you compartmentalise what you are reading.

Every big idea has a brief, bullet point summary section.

Big idea 2

Only one chapter includes three 'Big Idea' sections: Chapter 3 (Property, Minimal Government and Reparations). Every other chapter has two.

More ideas – Developments/Criticisms

This section is not an 'add on'. The ideas here may be of more interest/import to some people than the 'big ideas', and they are as important. However, they might not be as well known.

(Continued)

In most cases, this section is to present crucial developments on the foundational ideas or to present a crucial critique, but some thinkers are selected because of how recent those ideas are rather than how well-known. Sometimes individual thinkers will be selected, at other times there will be a general 'literature'. This depends on the topic and is justified in the overview section.

Each section has sub-headings to help you compartmentalise what you are reading. There will be some boxed quotes in this section too.

These also have a bullet point summary at the end.

Tasks and assignments

The tasks are to help you reflect on the 'big ideas' in this chapter. They can be used to test your knowledge or as learning tools in their own right. They are accompanied by a potential essay title.

Go deeper

This is a short-annotated reading list for people who would like to read further on the topics in the chapter. Sometimes, the 'Go Deeper' section will include one of the key texts from a 'Big Idea' or 'More Ideas' section. This is the case when the thinkers in these sections have other things to say – some pieces of work are massive and have several big ideas that would be too much to cover in one chapter. In other situations, the 'Go Deeper' section focuses primarily on further reading from different thinkers. In these cases, they function as secondary/additional reading for an assignment on the topics in the chapter. Consequently, the 'Go Deeper' section may include very recent, and comparatively unknown, thinkers.

References

There is a references section for everything cited in each chapter *at the end of the book*. Do not ignore the references section! It is a useful reading list!

Chapter previews

A short preview of each chapter.

Part 1 How should we live together?

The chapters are grouped into three parts. Part 1 puts emphasis on Floyd's first question: 'how should we live?'. This means the emphasis is on the political theory as a 'should' question – or normative political theory. The chapters are about putting forward ideas – in particular, principles – that ought to govern laws, structures and society in general. Of course, this does not mean discussions on power, etc. do not feature at all! That is not how political theory works, but it is to give you some

structure to the topics, as well as an idea that different approaches emphasise different aspects of political theory.

Chapter 1 Human nature

We begin by examining ‘big ideas’ on human nature, because if we are going to think about how we should live together and how we should organise our human societies, then discussions on what humans are is important. This chapter does not just examine ideas on what human nature is though, but whether or not human nature is something we ought to correct or maximise. Further, the idea that there is even a human nature at all is questioned, including the criticism that theories of it have been ‘Western’ (or Euro) and male centric. We conclude by considering Indigenous creation stories as a comparative source for the question of human nature. If we think this is legitimate or not, it helps us understand that human nature is a political concept as much as it is a biological, psychological or anthropological one.

Please note that when I say ‘Main Thinkers’ that does not mean there are not other people featured in these chapters, as a small aside or additional contribution – for example, in this chapter, Edward Said opens up thoughts on Indigenous origin myths. ‘Main Thinkers’ is just to give a general overview of who you will mostly be reading about in each chapter.

Main Thinkers: Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

Chapter 2 Justice

Now that we have thought about what we are, in terms of our nature, we turn to the next logical step – what is a just society? If we can know this, we can start thinking about how to implement it. As ever though, the answer, and even the way we go about figuring it out – or the method – is not straightforward. In this chapter we examine a key theory of justice and a feminist critique, as well as methodological debates within political theory.

Main Thinkers: John Rawls, Susan Okin, Mariah Lind, Charles Mills, Raymond Geuss.

Chapter 3 Property, minimal government and reparations

Ideas on property often come just after ideas on justice – for many, a just society not only promotes, but protects. This chapter looks at property rights and how they develop into ideas on minimal government. It then considers how property rights are potentially a Euro-centric notion, and the issue of what to do with property that was stolen from Indigenous peoples, or property that was acquired through slave labour – reparation theory.

Main Thinkers: John Locke, Robert Nozick, Joseph Pierre Proudhon, Ernesto Verdetta.

Chapter 4 Freedom and liberty

Discussions on property quickly develop into ideas on freedom and liberty. In this chapter, we examine various theories of freedom, including the difference between an ‘ancient’ and ‘modern’ liberty, freedom of speech and colonial hypocrisy (and hegemony) when it came to these ideas. We also consider freedom as capability, which has influenced disability theory – the latter we look at in more detail in Chapter 6.

Main Thinkers: Benjamin Constant, John Stewart Mill, Rammohun Roy, Martha Nussbaum.

Chapter 5 Democracy

In this chapter we consider not just what democracy is, but what we want from it, and how to measure its value. We first consider how democracy is in tension with expertise as a form of government. Then we examine a decolonial view of democracy, which involves rethinking our definition of it. This leads to ideas on deliberative democracy. We end the chapter looking at how liberalism, capitalism and meritocracy interact with democracy.

Main Thinkers: Plato, Amartya Sen, Maeve Cooke, Michael Sandel.

Part 2 What Happens when we do not agree?

Part 2 considers Floyd’s second and third questions – what happens when we do not agree, and can we even agree? This means that the chapters in Part 2 give more focus to theorising power than theorising principles of justice. Again, that does not mean ideas on justice do not feature at all – it is about emphasis!

Chapter 6 Identity, recognition and intersectionality

In Chapter 6 we look at big ideas on identity and intersectionality. We consider the birth of intersectionality not just as a theory, but a political movement – the Combahee River Collective. We then think about intersectionality as an approach to political theory, which leads us to theorise other identities, or intersections, which can lead to political discrimination. This includes queer theory and disability theory. We end with a critique of politics of identity through the lens of a patriotic left.

Main Thinkers: Kimberley Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, Immanuel Kant, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Amber Knight, Richard Rorty.

Chapter 7 power

Power is a central topic for political theory. If we have theorised principles of justice, we need to consider how power disrupts – and helps achieve – those principles. We look at ideas on what the place of power is within politics, how

it relates to morality, how it functions and how it becomes precarious – essentially what it is.

Main Thinkers: Kautilya, Machiavelli, Frederick Douglass, Frederick Nietzsche, Steven Lukes.

Chapter 8 Political legitimacy

Now we have thought about what power is, it is important to think about who gets to wield it and why. To consider political legitimacy, we examine the theory of sovereignty and the social contract. Then we consider two significant criticisms: the idea of the social contract as *The Sexual Contract*, and the idea of it as *The Racial Contract*. We then question what political order is and end the chapter asking the question, What kinds of authority do people obey?

Main Thinkers: Thomas Hobbes, Carole Pateman, Charles Mills, Peter Kropotkin, Max Weber.

Chapter 9 Crime, security and punishment

In this chapter we consider how a state secures itself from threat, in what way punishment is limited, and how threats are framed and positioned. This chapter therefore focuses on prisons and a disciplinary society. But it also examines depoliticisation – how groups are presented as a threat to a state's security. We specifically look at biopolitics and states of emergencies.

Main Thinkers: Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, Hannah Arendt, Kathleen Arnold, Achille Mbembe.

Chapter 10 Political resistance

How a state secures itself against threats overlaps very closely with ideas on political resistance. In this chapter, we examine non-violence and violence as strategies of political resistance, in terms of practicality and normativity. This is contextualised within a colonial relationship, and not all forms of resistance seek overthrow. Rather, they seek change to a specific law within the system. For this, we consider theories of civil disobedience in the developments section.

Main Thinkers: Mahatma Gandhi, Karl Marx, Franz Fanon, Henry David Thoreau, John Rawls.

Part 3 Future political theory

Part 3 is to think of political theory as a *forward-looking* subject too. It is not just about what has happened and what is happening now, but what will (or should) happen in the future. We consider a future political theory in Part 3.

Chapter 11 Climate theory

This chapter starts with a puzzle – there's no such thing as a natural disaster. Climate theory includes solving this puzzle through disaster theory, which briefly starts with Machiavelli. We then consider the claim that climate change is the next stage in colonisation, particularly in regards to Indigenous peoples.

The big idea that we need to rethink all big ideas in the context of climate change is explored, before finishing the chapter with an intersectional view of climate theory.

Main Thinkers: Machiavelli, Kyle Whyte, Pierre Carbonnier.

Chapter 12 Technology, AI and basic income

We close this book thinking about how AI and an automated workforce will affect our societies economically, politically and psychologically. We think about nation states and corporations as having similar traits to AI and consider the relations between them. We then look at the big idea of Universal Basic Income as a possible response to AI, and changes in capitalism. We look at barriers to this too – not just economic but cultural.

Main Thinkers: David Runciman, Miranda Perry Fleischer, Otto Lehto, Thomas Piketty.