West By Not West: Comparative Democratic Theory is Constellational

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In 2020, Alexander Weiss introduced the idea of "comparative democratic theory" (CDT). For it to work, argues Weiss, a comparativist must first: "(1) identify relevant cases of non-Western democratic thought" (such as socialist democracy, Hungarian-style up to 1989, see Milan Pap in this issue for more); "(2) interpret the [text/s on that or those cases] from a globally comparative perspective; and (3) play back conceptual insight from the [text/s] to [a global, pluralist, body] of democratic theory" (2020, 32). Weiss' proposal is novel but, as Bernd Reiter would almost certainly express, it could do more to demonstrate how earlier proposals for the decolonization of knowledge precede it.

From its first iteration, CDT has proven to be a difficult idea to wield for, at least, three reasons. Many of these have close resemblance to concerns raised regarding its predecessor, comparative political theory. First, what exactly is the West or the non-West? Second, who is to determine what counts as "democracy" within those categories and why rely on texts alone and not, for example, other sources of knowledge? Third, how would a researcher's insights from – in the researcher's and their epistemic community's perspective – a "discovered" non-western democracy be "played back" to the Anthropos' take on democracy, to Weiss' "globally oriented democratic theory" (2020, 41)? Even if the first two questions were answered by a researcher, the third question vexes us all: as the relative novelty of this turn to non-western theory attests, democratic theory remains largely western, making this invocation of the "home" or "body" of a global democratic theory not only uncertain but – if once more cloaking western thought in the guise of universals – problematic.

These questions make practicing CDT difficult. To make its practice easier, here we build on the literature defining the non-West to provide a configurative meaning that, we hope, will prove useful to other researchers (see Osterberg-Kaufmann, Stark, and Mohammad-Klotzbach in this issue for more on the configurative approach). From there we discuss

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what it may mean to agree on "democracy" in the so-called western and non-western realms.

What Is Not the West or What is Non-western

If the literature referring to "non-western democracy" or, to triangulate the point, "non-western" international relations and psychology can agree on one thing, it is that essentialized boundaries between the West and "the rest" (Hall 2018) are epistemically and politically problematic. See, for example, the give and take of democratic theories between scholars in or of the Greater China Region and the rest of the world (Noesselt, in this issue) or how Nyerere "advance[d] a form of democracy characterized by a merge of some practices from the African past and others from the western world" (Masabo, this issue). Yves Schemeil also shows (2015)) how the intermingling of ideas, technologies, and practices over centuries troubles binaric associations between science and the West or mysticism and the East. Today few people – in large part because of European colonialism and empire, including neocolonial variants, such as in academia itself (McKeown 2022) – have not been exposed to and influenced by what might be counted as western ideologies in action.

At the same time, western thought and practice include strands counter to those most associated with the West; indeed, at times the West could be seen as consistently at odds with itself. Long-standing ideologies of individualism, humanism, Christian patriarchy, and abstract universalism and their expression in liberal democracy, capitalism, and colonialism coexist with currents of materialism, perspectivism, and collectivism. Patriarchy and feminism, imperialism and nonviolence, violent extraction and ecological care, radical egalitarianism and exceptionalism all have expression within both the ostensible "West" and "non-West." And yet there remain "family resemblance[s]" within western and non-western traditions (Nichols 2020) despite these internal multiplicities and overlaps, particularly with regard to emphasis and entrenchment.

This calls for a constellational approach to these very categories. Western and non-western constellations, where difference is via degrees of emphasis or situated expression more than essentialized trait, attain conceptual distance from otherwise problematic terms and signal the need to be careful with our terms as they can serve to confuse more than they can enlighten if they are taken in the erstwhile rendition.

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Agreeing on "Democracy" among Constellations

If we are to detect the democracies of either constellation in the real world, then we also need to agree, conceptually, on what counts as democratic in both constellatory realms. Key here would be to co-create the definition of what counts as democratic with the people who are enacting the themes of either constellation in a given place (e.g., a village or a city, a workplace, a school, a home, an apartment building, etc.). The approach taken by Frankenberger and Buhr, in these pages, is to use Grounded Theory. It requires *not* expert theorization, at least not initially, but collaborative theory generation instead—one based on close empirical observations of how *x* (say certain people) behave in *y* (say a school). For example, a community of organic, carbon draw-down gardeners working a common plot in their Wrocław neighborhood might, if asked, define their system as democratic because they work acephalously and they resolve their disputes through dialogue. Or a group of worker-owners in a democratically structured mining company operating on contested indigenous land to the west of the so-called Peel River (Yukon) might define, when asked, their system as democratic because they elect their leaders each year, share in both the profits and the shortfalls, and organize their work according to their needs and interests. Not only should the democracies of both realms be co-determined, they should also be constrained to *what* they promulgate—for that is what separates them. There will likely also be democracies that fall somewhere in between both constellations—in this case, on the grounds of whether they aim at violent extraction or ecological care—if they exhibit practices that reinforce themes from both realms. Conceptual distinctions provide normative edge here, enabling evaluation and adaptation of those aspects of such hybrid cases that promulgate unethical ends.

If the western constellation is characterized by stronger traditions of objectification, extraction, and colonization that have led to profound environmental and social devastation, it follows that CDT's mission is to identify and then popularize those non-western constellation democracies that express and reinforce aims of ecological and intergenerational relations and decolonization, with the hopes of influencing western constellation and hybrid democracies, as well as non-, quasi-, or semi-democracies to follow their lead. There is a double action to this work. For example, if a comparativist detects a tyrannical manufactory which, when put to observation, is found to be both environmentally and socially destructive in how it functions, then this comparativist might try to encourage that corporation or its workers to adopt *both* the means to

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do their work without damaging the environment and themselves and to do so by finding democratic ways of working.

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In this issue, Frederic Schaffer underscores CDT's mission of learning from the non-western constellation and, in so doing, offers insights to both democracies of a western constellatory orientation *and* non-democracies wherever they are to be found. And that is because "democracy warrants rethinking" (Schaffer, this issue). Why? Well, aside from the usual answers given in the vast crisis of democracy literature, if we maintain the association that the western constellation has produced democracies with weak(er), or even downright unethical, credentials we then accept their invalidity or at least undesirability. "Rescuing" or "saving" democracy becomes, then, less about restoration and more about potentially dramatic reforms. Historically, this means that slave-holding and women-excluding Athens does not qualify as a democracy (certainly not a "first democracy") – especially if it were to be compared to contemporaneous societies in which all members truly were equal and able to have their say in public matters (see, for example, Graeber and Wengrow 2022). Today, the same would be said for the so-called United States where privatization has succeeded in excluding enormous swathes of the population in that territory from equal opportunity to education, healthcare, safety, and even clean water. CDT is more than comparing kinds of democracy or approaches to governance. It is an attempt at finding better role models for democracy.

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