**Comparative Historical Analysis in Political Theory**

# Introduction

Here are two leading topics of methodological debate in political theory. First, what is the role of historical interpretation in the work of political theorists? Second, how should political theorists compare different cultural traditions of thought about politics? The first question animates a long-standing controversy over the relative importance of ‘historical’ and ‘philosophical’ approaches to political theory, and the extent to which philosophical reasoning is dependent on contextually specific acts of historical interpretation (Floyd & Stears, 2011; Green, 2015; Philp, 2008; Skinner, 1969). The second question, though not new, has risen to prominence in in the recent growth of ‘comparative political theory’ (CPT): ‘a perspective that attempts to relocate the canon of political theory within a wider paradigm of non-Western and postcolonial traditions’ (Little, 2018, p. 88, see also: Dallmayr, 1997; Euben, 2000; Goto-Jones, 2009; Jenco, 2007; Jenco, Idris, & Thomas, 2020; March, 2009; von Vacano, 2015). The debates over each question are distinct but overlap: in considering how historical context shapes normative judgements and how cross-contextual normative theory is possible (see also: Lægaard, 2019).

A noteworthy feature of both debates is that they primarily focus on the study of *political thought,* rather than *political behaviour.* These are obviously not entirely different phenomena. Much work in the history of political thought and comparative political theory stresses the need to study ideas in the context of broader political practices and understands political thought as itself a form of engaged communicative action (Freeden, 2013; Freeden & Vincent, 2012; Pocock, 2009; Simon, 2020; Skinner, 1974; Tully, 1983). Almost all political theorists are interested in political thought, in part, because it guides, enables, or obstructs certain kinds of political behaviour. That thought often plays this role is a virtual axiom of modern social and psychological theory. Nevertheless, study of behaviour in and of itself figures only peripherally in these debates. On both questions, political theorists usually speak of history as the history of thought, and comparison as the comparison of thought.

In consequence, these debates have remained largely disconnected from discussions of *comparative history* within the humanities and social sciences. There is, indeed, a major approach to political science – ‘comparative historical analysis’ (CHA) – that is entirely concerned with using historical comparisons for the study of political behaviour, but which gone almost entirely ignored by political theorists. In the ‘history vs. philosophy’ debate, the ‘historians’ typically stress the need for context-specific inquiry rather than comparison, while the ‘philosophers’ downplay the relevance of history in general. Comparative political theory, by contrast, *does* have intellectual roots in the use of history in comparative political science. Yet as von Vacano (2015, p. 467) observes: ‘much of the work that goes by the name of CPT does not have clear connections to comparative politics.’ Of course, many canonical theorists like Ibn Khaldūn, Niccolo Machiavelli, Alexis de Tocqueville, Max Weber or Hannah Arendt made important use of historical comparisons,[[1]](#footnote-1) and there are obviously works in modern political and ethical theory that also make use of historical cases (e.g. Glover, 1999; Walzer, 1977/2000; Wolfe, 2011). But they do not generally employ a systematic method of comparative history, and do not feature much in ongoing methodological debates about the role of history and comparison in political theory.

In this paper, I argue that this represents a missed opportunity. CHA in political science is fundamentally concerned with *causal* inquiry and can therefore obviously be relevant for political theory in the way all social scientific knowledge can: to empirically inform how we go about trying to achieve our normative goals (Swift & White, 2008). But I will set this important empirical role for CHA aside in order to make a more ambitious claim: that the methodology of CHA can be adapted for *conducting* *normative* *political theory* *itself*. This ‘normative CHA,’ as I term it, revives what Lane (2011, p. 146) observes as the ‘now unfashionable role of history in its significance for normative political theory: its function as a storehouse of examples of actions and of lives.’ Like Lane, I think this role deserves to be back in fashion, to address recent calls for political theory to become more empirically engaged with real-world politics.[[2]](#footnote-2) Normative CHA also complements more ‘philosophical’ political theory in a different way to the history of political thought and CPT: providing a counterbalance to the heavy present reliance on imaginary cases by using real-world historical cases for similar methodological purposes.[[3]](#footnote-3)

I press a strong claim: that normative CHA should be elevated from relative disuse to become one of the principal methods of normative inquiry in political theory. Without central use of normative CHA, political theory is consistently left lopsided – whether towards the study of thought over behaviour, imaginary cases over real cases, immediate dilemmas over major historical cases, or anecdotal examples over systematic cross-case comparisons. Yet my stance is methodologically pluralist. I affirm that imaginary cases are *also* crucial to normative inquiry, and I share the view that ‘the opposition between history and political philosophy…is a false one’ (Kelly, 2011, pp. 33-34, see also: Green, 2015). My defence of normative CHA does not depend on any particular stance in prominent controversies over, for example, the fact-sensitivity of political principles (Cohen, 2003; Jubb, 2009; Pogge, 2008), realism vs. moralism (Baderin, 2021; Erman & Möller, 2015a, 2015b; Estlund, 2017; Jubb & Rossi, 2015a, 2015b; Rossi & Sleat, 2014), practice-dependence (Erman & Möller, 2019; Jubb, 2016; Sangiovanni, 2016), analytical vs. critical philosophy (McDermott, 2010; McNay, 2013), or normative behaviourism (Erman & Möller, 2023; Floyd, 2017; Miller, 2023). Theorists on all sides of these debates agree that, at some point, normative political theory must engage real political contexts (Lægaard, 2019). This is all my argument for normative CHA requires.[[4]](#footnote-4)

I proceed in three main sections. First, I explain why political theorists should not rest satisfied with the analysis of either imaginary cases or present real-world politics and have reason to consider comparative analysis of historical cases as an input to their research. Second, I briefly explain what conventional CHA within political science consists of. I then, third, make my core argument concerning how CHA can be adapted for normative political theory, delineating three distinct uses of normative CHA for such research.

# Why Care about Historical Cases?

Methods are fundamentally justified by the virtues of ‘good research’ that they are intended to support. Here are four plausible desiderata of good political theory relevant for my discussion:

1. Good political theories should be *clear –* their assumptions, concepts, internal chains of reasoning, and conclusions should be as easy as possible to identify.
2. Good political theories should be *grounded* – their empirical and evaluative assumptions and arguments should be backed by the appropriate kinds of support (whether this be intuitions, good empirical data, lived human experiences, fundamental axioms, or whatever).
3. Good political theories should be *systematic* – they should allow us to understand how a coherent body of concepts, standards, principles, and values can be consistently interacted with features of specific contexts to justify normative judgements.
4. Good political theories should be *relevant* – they should reveal useful insights about real puzzles and dilemmas that concern those to whom the theory is addressed.

These are not the *only* desiderata: we may also value theories for their imagination, contrariness, irony, rhetorical power, and much else besides (Cassam, 2023). We may also have reservations about how far individual desiderata should be pursued. A prominent strain of political theory, for example, expresses reservations about just how clear and systematic ethical theories can really be, often stressing the importance of *judgement* – understood as a less formal way of applying our ethical ideas to concrete cases (Beiner, 1983; Bourke & Geuss, 2009; Green, 2015, p. 432; Jonsen & Toulmin, 1988; Williams, 1985/2006). As Haddock (2011, p. 66) puts it: ‘thinking is agonising and tentative. Tidying up too much of the messiness at the edges can be deeply misleading.’ There is a balance between different desiderata to be struck. I only claim that we seek theories that are as clear, grounded, systematic, and relevant as we can reasonably make them.

Political theorists employ various methods to improve the clarity, groundedness, systematicity and relevance of their work. In *normative* political theory, a central concern is to assess whether putative concepts, claims, standards, principles, values or theories seem justifiable with reference to different particular situations. Even if we do not seek ‘universal’ theories, we do as far as possible want normative theories whose differing implications in different settings appear coherent and explicable rather than arbitrary and ad hoc. This reflects the fact that ‘moral discourse talks cases’ (Jonsen, 1995, p. 237). We assess our normative concepts, claims, standards, principles, values or theories, at least in part, by considering what they would imply in particular cases and how those implications shift across different cases.

The prevailing way political theorists have conducted such assessment of normative claims is through the use of *imaginary cases* (Dowding, 2022; Elster, 2011), typically in the form of *thought experiments* (Brownlee & Stemplowska, 2017; Cooper, 2005; Slavny, Spiekermann, Lawford-Smith, & Axelsen, 2021). This use of imaginary cases has a high pedigree, not just in philosophy, but in the natural sciences and mathematics. As Brownlee and Stemplowska (2017, p. 21) summarise:

In negative terms, [thought experiments] can (1) expose a contradiction, (2) undermine a key premise, (3) reveal a conflation of concepts or principles, or (4) highlight the counterintuitive implications of an argument. In positive terms, they can (1) demonstrate the consistency or coherence of a set of principles/concepts, (2) highlight congruities and similarities between different claims, (3) reveal the scope of the application of a given principle, and (4) bring forth intuitions not previous considered, amongst other things.

Even if true, one might wonder (as some political theorists do) why we would rely on such imaginary cases when we could purely focus on real cases. Shouldn’t we be more interested in actual political contexts than philosophical flights of imagination?

Although I do call for more examination of real-world historical cases, a strong dismissal of imaginary cases is misguided for at least three reasons. First, real-world cases are hugely complex in ways that can confound or bias our normative judgements. Imaginary cases allow us to construct tightly specified scenarios to probe our normative claims in a controlled manner. Second, the real world is finite, offering a potentially quite constrained set of relevant cases to study for any normative problem. Phenomena of ‘path-dependence’ (Mahoney, 2000) – where key historical junctures strongly constrain subsequent developments – also make many real-world cases too similar to yield interesting comparisons. Equally, available real-world cases might be too *dissimilar* to productively compare. A comparison of slavery in Ancient Greece, pre-Civil War America, and modern human trafficking could be interesting, for example, but these contexts could be too radically unalike to generate many normative insights (Vlassopoulos, 2016). Using imaginary cases avoids our normative thinking being trapped by the limits of available real-world cases. Third, considering imaginary cases is simply *unavoidable,* becausethe future is always imaginary from the perspective of the present – it does not yet exist. To analyse different possible future worlds, we must imagine those worlds, however much the construction of such imaginary cases might be informed by our best concrete real-world empirical knowledge (Dowding, 2022; Leader Maynard, 2024).

Nevertheless, much contemporary political theory does not strike the balance between engagement with imaginary cases and real cases appropriately. If ‘political theory must be the theoretical study of politics as a practical predicament’ (Lane, 2011, p. 147), consideration of real-world cases should not be some secondary consideration of how we apply our principles in practice, but part of the formulation and assessment of our core concepts, arguments, and theoretical frameworks in the first place. The complexities of real-world cases, moreover, cannot be assumed *a priori* to be bias-generating noise as opposed to relevant features of ethical dilemmas that we ignore at our peril. Even accepting this, however, one might query why we should care about *historical* real-world cases. Why not just focus on concrete cases in the here-and-now as, for example, in ethnographic political theory or engaged normative policy analysis (Lever & Poama, 2019; Longo & Zacka, 2019)?

Such consideration of present cases is obviously relevant. But *only* considering such cases carries obvious problems. It increases dangers of certain kinds of bias and further limits the range of relevant cases available for analysis. Available data on ongoing present cases is often highly unreliable, and there is typically less of a body of established research on which to draw when analysing them. Historical cases also typically allow us to see the fuller consequences of various normative choices and courses of action in a way that remains unclear with ongoing cases. Furthermore, since we can only analyse the present under the influence of our existing knowledge, there is a sense in which historical cases always figure at least tacitly in our normative thinking. As Lane (2011, p. 148) observes: ‘Theorists who don’t read history will nevertheless rely on history – what they remember of it from school or assume of it from contemporary chatter. Both history and normative theory are present as background assumptions in the culture, and so the wise theorist or social scientist will interrogate those assumptions.’

There are countervailing trade-offs. Again, historical cases may occur is such a different context that they simply cannot shed light on contemporary problems. But that danger can be overstated. The aim of normative CHA is not to *clone* conclusions in historical cases for the present moment: as though the fact that the Allied war effort in World War II was justified means that any particular war today would be equally justified. The aim is to use historical cases to build better theoretical accounts of how our normative principles operate coherently across different contexts, including when they yield different conclusions because the contexts are different. Still, the translation of implications from distant historical cases to our own theoretical concerns is not straightforward. Another danger concerns the relative reliability of available historical research, since various kinds of selectivity, cultural and political bias, data problems, and manipulation trouble historical writing, as well as its employment by non-historians (MacMillan, 2010). Historical cases are not just ‘there’ to be objectively picked up by political theorists, so normative CHA requires good critical judgement, interpretation, and some degree of historical craft on the theorist’s part.[[5]](#footnote-5) For both reasons, a balance between consideration of more ‘historical’ and ‘present’ cases is almost always going to be necessary.

I also mean nothing antiquarian in talking of ‘historical’ cases, and the cases that most interest political theorists may often be relatively modern. What matters is that we are examining past cases and approaching them historically: using leading historical research and a broad range of available data, appropriately interpreted, to construct rich understandings and narratives of the contexts and events involved. The basic claim is simply this: if our political theories are sound, they should be able to make normative sense of (at least many) real-world cases in the (at least recent) past. As such, systematic and comparative exploration of such past real-world cases ought to be a principal means for political theorists to build, test, and extend the concepts, claims, standards, principles, values and theories they work with.

# What is Comparative Historical Analysis?

In the most general sense, conventional CHA refers to the systematic comparative use of data from multiple past cases[[6]](#footnote-6) of some phenomenon (revolutions, say, or the breakdown of electoral coalitions), to contribute to explanations of such phenomena by revealing the conditions and processes that produced the outcome in each case (Mahoney, 2004; Mahoney & Terrie, 2008; Skocpol & Somers, 1980). This might involve the researcher engaging in new primary research, or it may involve them using established bodies of historical scholarship to build detailed case studies for the purposes of their comparative analysis. The approach has a high pedigree, with as many as half of leading publications in comparative politics involving some elements of comparative historical analysis (Mahoney & Terrie, 2008).

Advocates of CHA present it as playing a distinct but complementary role to statistical research methods. Statistical approaches to causal inference generally estimate the ‘average causal effect’ of independent variables across an affected population. For example, they might estimate the average change in a party’s share of the vote in different districts produced by local radio broadcasts supportive or critical of that party (Adena, Enikolopov, Petrova, Santarosa, & Zhuravskaya, 2015). CHA, by comparison, generally seeks to identify the combination of causal factors that was necessary and/or sufficient to explain why a specific outcome occurred and then, from comparison of such outcomes, to arrive at more general knowledge about the possible combinations of causal factors that generate them. In the disciplinary jargon, while statistical methods are generally interested in ‘effects-of-causes’, CHA is more concerned with ‘causes-of-effects.’ Practitioners of CHA affirm that every historical case is unique, and do not seek to identify invariant ‘causal laws’ that fully explain all cases of a phenomenon.[[7]](#footnote-7) Instead, they aim to identify causal commonalities between different cases of a phenomenon – for example, recurring causal conditions or mechanisms (Hedström & Ylikoski, 2010) – while highlighting relevant differences.

CHA can be employed from different methodological perspectives. Some use it in ways comparable to laboratory experiments or multivariate regressions: to investigate how a particular cause matters through *controlled comparison* of cases (Skocpol & Somers, 1980, pp. 181-187). Experiments and regressions have certain advantages over comparative history here: they can more carefully control for confounding variables and more precisely estimate causal effects. Yet they also have disadvantages. They rely on precise measurements, which are not easily obtainable for many causal factors of likely importance (such as beliefs); cannot easily establish necessary or sufficient causes of specific outcomes (Mahoney & Terrie, 2008); and encounter difficulties when causal relations are complex, heterogenous, nonlinear, contingent, multidirectional or involve high equifinality (Jervis, 1997; Mahoney & Terrie, 2008). CHA offers a different kind of causal inquiry that complements these deficiencies.

CHA can be understood, however, in ways less like a controlled experiment: as involving the application of existing knowledge to richly reconstructed real-world cases to make new inferences about causal relationships (Mahoney & Terrie, 2008). One might also use CHA to demonstrate that a pre-established theory appears to hold in its implications across a range of real-world cases or, conversely, to highlight the contextual limits to specific generalizations (Skocpol & Somers, 1980, pp. 176-181). Or one could reject traditional conceptions of causation, and instead see CHA as an interpretive research strategy for deciphering the meaning of diverse human practices in response to common analytical problems (Adcock, 2013). One might believe (as I do) that CHA can be used in complementary ways for all these different kinds of inquiry.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Again, this use of CHA in *causal* inquiry could be relevant for political theory by helping us understand how the political world empirically works. But my concern is to clarify how CHA could be used, independent of this empirical contribution, for directly normative inquiry. I assume that this ‘normative CHA’ will involve broadly the same concrete methods for building accurate pictures of particular cases as conventional CHA: using existing historical scholarship, new primary research on relevant sources, and application of other relevant social scientific knowledge to build up rich, compelling pictures of the compared cases. But what normative CHA then does with these pictures is different. They provide a basis, not for *causal* inferences, but for making inferences about particular *normative* concepts, claims, standards, principles, values or theories.

# Three Strategies of Normative Comparative Historical Analysis

I identify at least three different ways in which comparative analysis of historical cases could be helpful for making normative inferences in political theory (and the three will often be combined): deductive, inductive, and casuistic. All three strategies can also be used with *non-historical* cases, and so may also help clarify ways in which closely related approaches like ethnographic political theory, grounded normative theory or the ethics of public policy use case analysis. All three can also be used *non-comparatively* – as a basis for linking single historical case studies to normative arguments. There is value in such single-case studies: they can often be more detailed than comparative studies and may yield important insights if they focus on crucial/critical cases (George & Bennett, 2005, pp. 32-33).

But I argue that the use of historical cases in normative political theory should usually be comparative. Indeed, the dangers of political decision-makers relying too heavily on individual historical analogies to guide future action is well recognised within the social sciences (Dyson & Preston, 2006; Khong, 1992). Unlike a thought-experiment, which can in principle be artificially constructed in such a way as to constitute a kind of ‘critical’ test for a certain normative argument, the messy complexity of real-world cases will typically make their implications for broader normative conclusions contestable. Perhaps, for example, a study of Jewish resistance to the Holocaust can yield interesting insights about the necessary conditions for justified private violence in the absence of political authority (Einwohner, 2022). But this particular case may seem so extreme that its ‘external validity’ for other cases – the extent to which any normative insights drawn from the case can be extended – will be questionable. Without cross-case comparison, theorists risk either selection bias – allowing general conclusions to be distorted by non-typical features of the given case – or parochialism – in leaving the relevance and implications of our claims unclear beyond the very narrow context that has been analysed.

Normative CHA can address such risks, by systematically comparing multiple cases to see if particular normative claims can be extended (or challenged) across cases. As in conventional CHA, certain research designs might compare across cases which *vary in many ways but which keep a key normative feature constant,* to see if that feature consistently supports a normative generalization (a ‘most-different’ case study design). In other research designs, we might use *highly similar cases that differ in only a few key respects*, to see if these differences yield different normative conclusions (a ‘most-similar’ case study design). Attention to appropriate ‘negative cases’ (Mahoney & Goertz, 2004) – in which we reach opposite normative conclusions from our main cases of interest (for example, cases in which private violence is not justified) – is also often critical for reaching robust normative conclusions. But whatever the exact research design, the normative insights wes can draw from the three strategies discussed below are likely to be clearer, better grounded, more systematic and more relevant the more they are explored comparatively across multiple cases.

## Deductive Testing

The first approach uses normative CHA in ways largely analogous to the dominant use of imaginary cases and thought-experiments: to identify the implications of particular normative concepts, claims, standards, principles, values or theories across different settings, and use such implications to ‘test’ the concept, claim, standard, principle, value or theory in question. Normative concepts, claims, standards, principles, values and theories all combine some kind of *content* with some *scope* (of contexts/situations) to which the content is assumed to apply (even if the content is dynamic, with different implications in different situations). In seeking to justify such concepts, claims, standards, principles, values or theories, one important task is therefore to clarify and assess their implications across a range of situations that appear to lie within their scope. In a more *productive* vein, we might be able to build persuasive force for a normative theory by showing that it continuously generates appropriate normative judgements across cases that fall within its scope.[[9]](#footnote-9) Alternatively, such an approach might be more *critical:* applying normative claims to diverse cases to challenge the plausibility of their application in many instances.

There are big epistemological questions concerning how such deductive testing via cases works. I am not going to resolve these, but my account here is compatible with a wide range of possibilities. A popular assumption is that our assessment of the test is essentially intuitive: we see whether the implications of our concepts, claims, standards, principles, values, or theories ‘feel right’ for the case under consideration. This raises longstanding debates about the reliability of intuitions (Conte, 2022; Floyd, 2017; Handby, 2022; Petrinovich & O'Neill, 1996). I make just two observations here. First, intuitions might be accepted as rather unreliable foundations for normative conclusions, and yet still thought to be inescapable at some point in our normative reasoning. In this case, intuitive acceptability may be a very low but nevertheless important bar for theories to cross – especially if conducted in relatively systematic ways such as those associated with reflective equilibrium (Cath, 2016; Slavny, Spiekermann, Lawford-Smith, & Axelsen, 2021). Second, since many intuitions represent deeply internalized patterns or rules, they may be relatively reliable *in the sense of consistently producing the same output* when probed appropriately. This is obvious with physical intuitions (such as how hard I can put down an unfamiliar glass object without breaking it), but the point extends to other intuitions. They should not be automatically deferred to, but they can consistently reveal the *implications* of rules we have internalised. As such, the state of our intuitions on confrontation with cases can reveal unnoticed compatibilities or incompatibilities between our conscious or unconscious commitments, prompting us to sustain or revise our thinking. This is all consistent with how appeals to thought-experiments and models are understood in both philosophy and science – where they are widely recognised as valuable (Cooper, 2005).

But there are other ways in which normative CHA as a form of deductive testing might proceed – depending on the methodological approach of the political theorist. Real-world cases could be opportunities to formally explore theories rendered as axiomatic-deductive frameworks. They might provide the basis for surveys or philosophical experiments to gauge mass responses. They could provide minimal tests for the logical coherence of a theory under different circumstances, or to assess if a theory is sufficiently specified to actually generate any meaningful implications in the concrete cases in question. They might be a way to assess if certain normative concepts, claims, standards, principles, values or theories ‘make sense’ for a given context, as Williams (2005, p. 25) puts – i.e. whether they can be properly connected to the self-understandings of the relevant agents who inhabit that context. There may be other possibilities. What matters is that in a deductive testing approach, we start with some normative material – concepts, claims, standards, principles, values, or theories – and then assess them via the *attempt* to apply them to different historical cases.

Again, a major use of deductive testing is *critical:* using comparison of historical cases to indicate the *invalidity* or *limits* of generalized normative arguments.[[10]](#footnote-10) This resembles a familiar use of the history of political thought and comparative political theory within political theory. Central to the value of intellectual history, Skinner (2002, pp. 6-7) argues, is that it shows ‘how far the values embodied in our present way of life…reflect a series of choices made at different times between different possible worlds’ which, in turn, can ‘liberate us from the grip of any one hegemonic account of those values and how they should be understood.’ A form of normative CHA based around broad comparative analysis of cases can serve a similar purpose. As a form of critical delimitation, normative CHA can use historical cases to show how certain normative arguments that are thought to apply to such cases look implausible, inapplicable, irrelevant, unnecessary, or dangerous when applied to conditions that differ in ways that advocates of such arguments have not attended to.

Some such critical testing may ambitiously seek to *refute* particular normative arguments, by showing that they appeal to universalist assumptions (for example, sweeping claims about essential human needs or political possibilities) which cannot be sustained on confrontation with different real-world historical cases. But much critical testing is really a way of properly *scoping* our normative theories. It is a means of avoiding what Williams (1995) called ‘Saint-Just’s illusion’ – referring to Marx’s and Engels’ critique of the Jacobin revolutionary leader who sought to set up modern politics on a conception of ancient rights that had no applicability to modern mass industrial societies. The point, Williams (1995, p. 137) stresses, is not that Saint-Just was not properly talking of people’s rights at all, but that he was blind to the way:

A value… can demand different social and political expressions at different times, and it is not simply a misunderstanding that refers these to the same value. Historical understanding is necessary to see how this can be so… [and to see] that the social requirements in terms of which an expression is viable in one set of historical conditions may make it a disaster in another: that was the nature of Saint-Just’s illusion.

This project might reflect a relatively broad scepticism about the scope of cross-contextual normative theorising – for Williams (1995, p. 147), no concepts can constitute the ‘universal and ultimate basis of all ethical experience.’ But less deeply contextualist theorists can still accept the validity of a Saint-Just’s-illusion style critique, since almost all accept that at least the concrete implications or ‘proposals’ of our normative theories, as (Estlund, 2020, pp. 11-12) terms them, will vary according to the contexts to which they are applied. Again, ‘most theories in political theory are contextualist in some sense’ (Lægaard, 2019, p. 953).

I reiterate that we can and should use imaginary cases for deductive testing too. But the complicating details of real-world cases are often not mere ‘noise’ that get in the way of our judgements, but relevant parts of actual, complex, realistic normative scenarios that could change our conclusions about them. Moreover, it is only possible to construct thought-experiments based on prior assumptions about what should and should not be included within them. Comparative consideration of historical cases, by contrast, forces the theorist to confront potentially *unexpected* factors which appear normatively relevant. Careful, rigorous consideration of normative theories across a range of appropriate historical cases is thus a crucial way of seeing whether our normative theories operate as intended and are able to provide meaningful, plausible guidance for actual agents confronting real-world problems.

## Inductive Construction

Whereas in deductive testing we start with some concepts, claims, standards, principles, values, or theories that we wish to assess in concrete cases, in inductive construction, we use examination of cases to generate new normative concepts, claims, standards, principles, values or theories. We often need a lot of ‘thick description’ of some phenomena of normative interest before we can really sort out our relevant normative ideas about that phenomenon. We might, for example, start with a potential normative problem, like the role of extremist political movements in democratic societies, and see, just from our basic depiction of such movements, that they raise certain issues of free speech, democratic inclusion, toleration, and so on (Hare & Weinstein, 2009). But we may feel that we simply do not know enough about the normatively relevant features of such movements to start making any meaningful normative inferences. Only by examining what concrete cases of extremist political movements look like can we begin to see how to theorise normative responses to them.

Again, what and how we induce in normative CHA may vary according to the interests and methodological perspective of the political theorist. One obvious kind of induction might be quite close to the use of conventional CHA for identifying key causal mechanisms that underlie certain phenomena. Normative theorists are often interested in the *normatively relevant potential effects* of certain political phenomena or dynamics, especially when these are non-obvious. They might, for example, be concerned with the way new practices of securitizing national borders affects those inside and outside a nation (Longo, 2018), or how a legal order of nation-states creates the danger of ‘stateless’ persons (Parekh, 2004), or how discursive forms of moral exclusion leave individuals vulnerable to extreme harm (Opotow, 1990). Comparative historical analysis offers a means for going beyond either abstract notions of injustice or individual cases of harm to theorise the more fundamental mechanisms or dynamics that can be identified, across cases, as critical threats to human wellbeing, and to systematically think through possible responses to those threats.

In other cases, normative CHA might be further removed from consideration of causal effects, instead leaning closer to normatively relevant forms of description or constitutive analysis. As Longo and Zacka (2019, p. 1066) argue, for example, ethnographic research on real-world cases often permits ‘problematizing redescriptions’ of phenomena, revealing normative concerns (or, one might add, normative benefits) which we did not previously consider, and which might require new concepts or frameworks to theorise. This applies equally to normative CHA. By examining multiple historical cases of a phenomenon of interest, such as revolutions or social cooperatives or campaigns of civil disobedience, we can develop a far richer picture of the kinds of values, concerns, benefits, and interests such phenomena typically or necessarily involve than would be possible by considering only present cases or imaginary thought-experiments.

Indeed, direct normative prescription is very far from the only function of political theory. Improving our value-laden descriptions and interpretations of politics is also a classic concern.As Green (2015, p. 432) argues: ‘At its best, then, political theory perceives political reality with superior clarity, so that students of political-theoretic works can come to intellectually manoeuvre within the political world with greater perspicacity, effectiveness and self-awareness.’ Familiarity with a broad range of comparative real-world cases helps cultivate this kind of clarity more systematically. Alternative, more descriptive forms of normative CHA might serve forms of conceptual-engineering (Nado, 2021): we might feel we need new or reinterpreted concepts in light of the comparative picture of certain phenomena we are able to build up. Little (2018, p. 94) argues, for example, that: ‘The point of conducting comparative political theory is that it is generative of new dimensions of political concepts or systems of knowledge that would hitherto have been more difficult to identify if the comparison had not taken place.’ This applies as clearly to normative CHA as it does to the comparative study of political thought.

The role that the real cases play in our resulting normative theories can also vary according to different methodological commitments. One might think that real-world cases actually ‘ground’ our normative concepts, claims, standards, principles, values or theories or, conversely, one might hold that facts about the real world only support such normative resources in virtue of higher-order principles that are not themselves dependent on any facts – see: (Cohen, 2003; Forcehimes & Talisse, 2013; Jubb, 2009; Pogge, 2008). But the utility of inductive construction is independent of the side one takes in this controversy. *Even if,* factual features of real-world cases did not provide the ultimate grounds for our normative theories, they are very frequently crucial to the practical epistemic process by which we come to understand and appreciate those normative theories (as even Cohen, 2003 accepts). Inductive consideration of real-world cases might also throw up normative insights *via* other normative commitments we already have: for example, if one is committed to respecting people as autonomous agents, then their own lived experiences of injustices may be critical inputs to one’s normative theory (Ackerly, Cabrera, Forman, Johnson, Tenove, & Wiener, 2024; Goodhart, 2018). Certainly there is no need to think that consideration of historical cases throws up normative insights entirely independent from prior normative assumptions or attitudes (as critiqued, for example, in Floyd, 2009). Provided that one is using comparative analysis of real historical cases to generate new normative concepts, claims, standards, principles, values or theories that are not logically necessary derivations of other existing prior commitments, one is using history for inductive construction.

## Casuistic Elaboration

Sometimes, however, scholars normatively analyse real cases in a way that is neither aimed at testing the plausibility of existing normative claims, nor generating what are essentially new normative resources. Instead, theorists are concerned to consider *how* normative commitments accepted in certain circumstances can shed light in somewhat different contexts – helping us to better elaborate and specify our normative thinking. This is effectively a form of *casuistry*, if that concept is shorn (as I, like Jonsen, 1995; Jonsen & Toulmin, 1988, think it should be) of pejorative connotations.

Like deductive testing, and unlike inductive construction, casuistic elaboration involves the application of existing normative concepts, claims, standards, principles, values or theories to real-world cases under consideration. This application might not, however, be a process of logical deduction: perhaps because these existing normative resources are underspecified for the novel cases we confront them with, or because the novel cases throw up challenges for any straightforward process of deductive application (which is frequently why we may be interested in such cases). As Jonsen and Toulmin (1988, p. 8) observe:

Once we move far enough away from the simple paradigmatic cases to which the chosen generalizations were tailored, it becomes clear that no rule can be entirely self-interpreting… In dealing with real-life moral problems, which so often turn on conflicts and ambiguities [of moral principles], we are forced to go behind the simple rules and principles themselves and see what underlies them.

There might be two kinds of response to such challenges for normative interpretation encountered when we confront real world cases. On the one hand, it might call for more theorisation of a fairly abstract kind to better think through and specify our existing theory (Jonsen, 1995, pp. 244-245). On the other, it might require deeper thinking through of the empirical dynamics of the case and the exercise of interpretation and judgement (Beiner, 1983), which may be closer to the kind of normative thinking involved in inductive construction.

Seeing how our existing normative thinking can be applied and elaborated through consideration of historical cases might be of intrinsic value – because we want to evaluate the cases in question. Based on a normative account of how we should conceptualise genocide, for example, we might be interested in whether a somewhat unfamiliar and unconventional class of cases, such as the panoply of policies of violence, segregation and forced assimilation employed by Canadian governments towards their indigenous populations, constitute genocide (Woolford, 2009). That intrinsic normative interest is more common, however, in active present concerns, as opposed to historical cases. Casuistry has commonly been employed to ethically assess new medical technologies, for instance, and we might similarly think that normatively theorising the problems of phenomena like AI or social media involves a lot of casuistic elaboration.

By contrast, the use of normative CHA for casuistic elaboration may be more typically valuable to political theorists for broader theoretical purposes: to deepen our understanding of the relationships between principles and contexts in our political theories by considering the challenges or opportunities for elaboration that arise when we move across different real-world historical cases. Like Szűcs (2020), for example, we might be interested in the kinds of political obligations that arise in illiberal regimes – where standard democratic arguments for obligation to political authority do not seem to apply. This might require an entirely new theory of obligation scoped to such regimes, which would imply a strategy closer to inductive construction. But we might, alternatively, think that certain core notions of political authority can extend across democratic and non-democratic regimes but take fundamentally different forms or implications under different regime types. Which of these theoretical approaches is best is not, I suggest, something that can be determined in the abstract. It is only through detailed comparative analysis of concrete cases of illiberal regimes and the particular dynamics of consent and rule within them (see, for example: (Gellately, 2001), that we can consider whether and how normative theoretical resources applicable to liberal societies might be applied to them.

# Conclusion

The roles of history and comparative study within political theory have been topics of extensive discussion and debate. Yet the use of *comparative history* in political theory has received far less attention. In this article I’ve suggested that this is unfortunate, because a normatively-orientated version of comparative historical analysis can be a powerful means for deductively testing, inductively constructing, or casuistically elaborating political theories in ways that bring political behaviour more prominently into the theorist’s focus.

As with the contrast between deductive and inductive research in social science, deductive, inductive, and casuistic activities in political theory are not separated by bright line distinctions. A linear image of science, in which theories are inductively constructed, then deductively proved or falsified, is widely understood to be inaccurate – in reality, scientists employ a more iterative back-and-forth process of generating, refining, testing and modifying their theories (Yom, 2015). The same is true in normative theory, where claims that we ‘start’ with one kind of theoretical activity (such as formulating abstract principles or considering concrete cases) and then proceed in some linear order through other steps of theorisation, is implausible. Indeed, reflective equilibrium – arguably the ‘the dominant method in moral and political philosophy’ (Knight, 2023) – can resemble iterative processes of investigation in science, *if* engagement with our judgements of real-world cases plays a central role. Normative CHA should therefore frequently mix the deductive, inductive and casuistic strategies I’ve described. There may also be other possible strategies of normative CHA.

My discussion has left many practical methodological details unaddressed – but much of this can be found in the existing literature on comparative historical analysis. I therefore argue not just for greater use of comparative history in political theory, but for deeper conversations between those using such a method in the humanities and social sciences, on the one hand, and political theory on the other. I also suggest the need for deeper links between history of political thought, comparative political theory, and normative CHA. The kinds of interpretive theories and methods developed by historians of political thought, and the forms of comparison and cross-contextual engagement demanded by comparative political theorists, remain crucial for plausible, contextually-sensitive interpretation and comparison needed for normative CHA. Equally, normative CHA offers a way of expanding the reach of both history of political thought and comparative political theory by elevating attention to political behaviour and by encouraging more explicit theorising of the deductive, inductive or casuistic logics through which we tie comparative-historical insights to our broader normative arguments.

This article therefore represents a call for political theorists to extend their consideration of the role of history and comparison in political theory in new directions. Existing debates over the historical and comparative study of political thought are important. But (with occasional exceptions) they leave broader forms of comparative historical investigation – of institutions, regimes, patterns of action, social movements, group relationships, technologies, systems of exchange, bureaucracies, and much else besides – strangely marginal. Individual political theorists may be interested in highly contextual normative assessments and prescriptions, or grand normative theories of wide or even universal scope, or something in between. They may be more methodologically rooted in history or philosophy and may be more constructive or critical in their orientation. But the normative analysis of politics by *all* such theorists will be inescapably informed by history and will typically generate conclusions that have at least some implications that travel across at least some historical cases. We should do more, as such, to incorporate the systematic comparison of such historical cases into the mainstream of political theory research.

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1. This unsurprisingly extends beyond the Western canon – for discussion see, for example: Goto-Jones (2009) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. From, for example, political realists (Sleat, 2018), normative behaviourists (Floyd, 2017), grounded normative theorists (Ackerly, Cabrera, Forman, Johnson, Tenove, & Wiener, 2024), ethnographic political theorists (Longo & Zacka, 2019), advocates of using survey data and experiments in political theory (Baderin & Barnes, 2020); and general advocates of a closer relationship between political theory and political science (Dowding, 2020; Perez, 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. There are also important *non-comparative* uses of history in political theory, such as genealogical explorations of particular practices, institutions or ideologies, but these are outside the scope of my discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Though there will likely be variations in how theorists use normative CHA according to their methodological perspective. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. My thanks to my reviewers for pressing me on this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. There is no natural delimitation of ‘one case’ – it depends on the phenomena and the goals of the researcher. For discussion of cases and case study methods, see: George and Bennett (2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Arguably, even statistically orientated forms of social science only seek to identify such causal laws in a limited sense at most – see: Dowding (2020, pp. 433-435). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. I do not subscribe to the widespread view that causal explanation and interpretation are dichotomous (as argued by, for example, Adcock 2013; Bevir and Blakely 2018; Hollis and Smith 1990). For discussions roughly aligned to my perspective, see: Dessler (1999); Dowding (2020, pp. 435-436); Norman (2021); Ylikoski (2013). Nothing in my argument here hangs on this position, however. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This somewhat resembles what Skocpol and Somers (1980, pp. 176-178) refer to as the use of comparative history for the ‘parallel demonstration of theory’ in causal research. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This roughly parallels the ‘contrast of contexts’ use of comparative history in causal inquiry discussed in Skocpol and Somers (1980, pp. 178-181). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)