

Philosophical Hermeneutics and Comparative Political Theory

Evgenia Ilieva

This paper examines Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics and its appropriation by Fred Dallmayr as a powerful alternative to Orientalism and political theory's parochialism. Drawing on Gadamer, a number of comparative political theorists similarly invoke the tropes of provocation, self-disruption, and self-dislocation to highlight the benefits that ensue from cross-cultural dialogue and the encounter with non-Western texts. But absent a more concrete theorisation of how dialogue may unsettle and disrupt our self-understandings, the repeated invocation of this trope remains just a phrase. The aim of this paper is to problematise the easy separation of dialogue from power that prevails in much CPT literature. To this end, I use Joshua Casteel's account of the encounter between an interrogator and detainee in his *Letters from Abu Ghraib* as an example of the kind of transformative self-disruption that comparative political theorists invoke but do not theorise.

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Whereas recent assessments of Comparative Political Theory (CPT) tend to describe the subfield as a distinctive and inevitable response to the dilemmas of globalisation, it is important to recall that in some of its earliest iterations the rationale behind the emergence of CPT also included a concern with moving beyond Orientalism and Eurocentrism.¹ Among those CPT scholars who have taken up Edward Said's critique of Orientalism, we can isolate two responses to his work. One approach, exemplified in the work of Leigh Jenco (2007, 2011) and Farah Godrej (2011), proposes deep immersion in local cultural contexts as an "exit" from the traps of Orientalism and Eurocentrism. A second approach, most closely associated with the work of Fred Dallmayr, finds an alternative to Orientalism and political theory's parochialism in Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics.

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1 For the most recent assessment of the aims, scope, and implications of the subfield of comparative political theory, see Diego von Vacano (2015).

In this paper, I examine Gadamer's hermeneutic approach and its appropriation by Fred Dallmayr as the preferred mode of engagement with non-Western texts.² Specifically, the paper focuses on Dallmayr's reading of Gadamer, who finds in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics a powerful response to Orientalism. As Dallmayr argues, Gadamer's insights can help us steer a course between "Eurocentrism" and "Euro-denial." More importantly, Dallmayr writes, Gadamer's hermeneutics can assist us in finding "the balance or 'mid-point' between self and other where alone dialogue can flourish" (Dallmayr 2002, 5). Dallmayr's invocation of dialogue should come as no surprise. Indeed, we must recall that one of the central ethico-political ambitions of CPT as a field of study is to foster a dialogue of cultures, or a dialogue among civilisations. For Dallmayr in particular, dialogue is the only way in which we can learn to live together peacefully in a deeply globalised world. "In the long run," Dallmayr argues, "[dialogue] offers the only viable alternative to military confrontation with its ever-present danger of nuclear holocaust and global self-destruction" (13). Although Dallmayr is aware that dialogue is not the only mode of civilisational encounter – and that historically it even appears to be one of the less likely modes of intercultural engagement – he has nevertheless sought to establish its normative primacy and preferability over conquest, missionary conversion, assimilation/acculturation, cultural borrowing, liberal neutralism, and class conflict (see Dallmayr 2002, 12-13; and Dallmayr 1996, 3-31).

My aim in this paper is to explore the roots of CPT's faith that dialogue can provide an antidote to Orientalism and the will to dominate. What is meant by dialogue? In which sense do CPT scholars use the term? If dialogue is possible only in conditions of equality, how should one proceed when such equality is absent? The paper begins to answer these questions by foregrounding Dallmayr's engagement with Gadamer's hermeneutics. My aim here is not to challenge the "correctness" of his interpretation of Gadamer. Rather, in undertaking this task, I seek to draw attention to the ways in which Dallmayr brings out the dialogic dimension of Gadamer's argument, how he himself puts it into practice, and how he makes the case for its relevance to CPT and cross-cultural studies more broadly.

While on the face of it dialogue appears to be self-evidently good, I argue that the concept remains under-theorised by comparative political theorists. Despite acknowledging some of the difficulties that might impede cross-cultural dialogue and understanding, I argue that, following Gadamer, there is a tendency among comparative political theorists to portray the movement of dialogue as a bit too easy and smooth. Drawing on Gadamer, a number of comparative political theorists

2 For similar critiques of Dallmayr's project, see Andrew March (2009) and Megan Thomas (2010).

similarly invoke the tropes of provocation, self-disruption, and self-dislocation to highlight the benefits that ensue from cross-cultural dialogue. But absent a more concrete theorisation of how a dialogue may unsettle and disrupt our self-understandings, the repeated invocation of this trope remains just a phrase. In so far as dialogue and the productive self-disruption it engenders has relevance beyond the realm of textual interpretations, and in so far as it is described as holding the key to real political violence in the world, it becomes imperative to give some specificity to what such self-disruption actually entails. As such, the aim of this paper is to problematise the easy separation of dialogue from power that prevails in much CPT literature. To this end, I use Joshua Casteel's account of the encounter between an interrogator and detainee in his *Letters from Abu Ghraib* as an example of the kind of transformative self-disruption that comparative political theorists invoke but do not theorise.

My interpretive strategy of taking a closer look at Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics and its appropriation by CPT scholars allows me to expand on the philosophical and political importance of dialogue, as well as to question the possibility of genuine dialogue, especially when such dialogue occurs against the backdrop of immense economic and political inequalities. Let me also note two caveats here. First, although I take seriously CPT's views on the normative value of the necessity for dialogue, I also seek to draw attention to the less sanguine elements of the process of dialogue, those elements that comparative theorists have left unexplored. As Ashis Nandy (2004) has suggested, dialogues need not always be egalitarian; they can also be hierarchical.

Second, while this paper takes a critical approach to the notion of dialogue I do not wish to suggest, as some commentators have done, that the dialogical strand of comparative political theory, together with its attempts to forge a global dialogue of cultures, constitutes an "utopian exercise in impossibility" (Freeden and Vincent 2013, 7). To dismiss dialogue merely as a naïve endeavor is to lose sight of the fact that one of the animating impulses behind CPT is a renewed concern with learning how to live with others in the context of deepening globalisation. With these caveats in place, the paper proceeds as follows. In the first section I offer an overview of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, focusing on six themes in his theory that are of particular relevance to comparative political theorists. The second section is devoted to tracing the ways in which Dallmayr has appropriated Gadamer's hermeneutics. Finally, in the last section I offer an example of a concrete hermeneutical encounter that both problematises and broadens the notion of dialogue advanced by comparative political theorists.

Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics

Rather than attempt an exhaustive treatment of Gadamer's work, in what follows I isolate those elements of his theory that are useful in understanding the dialogical dimension of philosophical hermeneutics and its relevance for cross-cultural learning more broadly. To this end, I focus on the following themes: tradition, authority, prejudice, fusion of horizons, dialogue, and openness.

One relatively simple way to enter into Gadamer's thought is to note that he developed his hermeneutic philosophy to address the challenge of how we may understand the meaning of texts that are historically distant from us. As Lauren Barthold (2010, xiii) observes, "[f]rom its earliest days hermeneutics has concerned itself with distance: how are we to cope with the divide between the alien and the familiar?" Building on Heidegger's insight that mind and world are not ontologically separate, Gadamer argued that every interpreter is always already situated within a particular tradition that cannot be set aside, and from within which she approaches any given text. Taking issue with the legacy of Cartesian inspired approaches that posit a neutral observer capable of suspending her "prejudices" in pursuit of "objective knowledge," Gadamer sought to retrieve a positive conception of prejudice as "prejudgment" and argued that prejudice, so defined, plays a central role in understanding (Gadamer 2004, 271).

Following Heidegger, Gadamer similarly maintains that there can be no presuppositionless interpretation and understanding. Countering the Enlightenment's "prejudice against prejudice" (273) and prevailing notions that prejudices necessarily exercise a restrictive influence upon our thinking, Gadamer argues that prejudgments are in fact a necessary condition for understanding (278). To get a better grasp of the central role that the concept of prejudice plays in Gadamer's thought, we must explore two other concepts that Gadamer seeks to rehabilitate: tradition and authority. Like Heidegger, Gadamer likewise asserts that we are more than just observers in the world. Rather, we are always already situated within, and participate, in a given tradition that is also the source of our prejudices. As something that is always part of us, tradition both conditions and is the condition for our understanding. Tradition for Gadamer, writes Richard Palmer, is like "a stream in which we move and participate, in every act of understanding. [It] is not over and against us, but something in which we stand and through which we exist;[...] it is so transparent a medium that it is invisible to us – as invisible as water is to fish" (Palmer 1969, 177). This is what Gadamer calls the "authority" of tradition. When comparative political theorists invoke Gadamer to speak about Western thinkers' "rootedness" in a tradition, this is what they have in mind.

If tradition is invisible to us in the sense just described, how can we ever become

aware of our prejudices or prejudgments for which tradition is the source? Here we must note that Gadamer (2004) distinguished between “true” or fruitful presuppositions that enable understanding and “false” prejudices that can lead to misunderstanding, that can prevent us from seeing and thinking (298). Crucially, he insisted that the only way we can come to understand which of our prejudices are “blind” and which of them are productive of understanding is by “testing” them through an encounter with otherness (the otherness of tradition, the otherness of a text, etc.). As Gadamer explains, “It is impossible to make ourselves aware of a prejudice while it is constantly operating unnoticed, but only when it is, so to speak, provoked. The encounter with a traditionary text can provide this provocation. For what leads to understanding must be something that has already asserted itself in its own separate validity” (298). It is only when something addresses us in this way, Gadamer argues, that understanding can begin.

The Conditions for Understanding: Openness, Dialogue, and the Fusion of Horizons

The encounter between an interpreter (her prejudices) and the traditionary text, or simply the encounter with otherness, initiates a process of question and answer. The text “addresses,” “tells,” or “says” something to us, and this is experienced as a “question” by the interpreter. While the encounter alone does not lead to understanding, it is a crucial component of the process of interpretation because it means that an opening for *dialogue* has occurred. As Gadamer (1976) writes, “Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something – whereby what we encounter says something to us” (9). Our prejudices or presuppositions, in being “provoked” by the encounter, open us up “for the new, the different, the true” (*ibid.*). The encounter, in effect, is what allows our prejudices to become visible to us; it allows us to foreground and expose our prejudgments both to our own doubt as well as to the rejoinder of the other (Gadamer 1989, 26). In becoming apparent to us through the encounter, our prejudices can in turn become the focus of questioning – both self-questioning and questioning by the other. As Gadamer (2004) writes, “prejudice[s] become questionable in view of what another person or a text says to us” (298). This means that they are capable of being modified, revised, and potentially discarded.

If the encounter with the unfamiliar is what provides the opening for dialogue, it is in the process of dialogue itself that understanding can occur. Gadamer (2004) invokes the model of dialogue or conversation to argue that understanding is the dialogic interaction between the reader and the text where co-creation of meaning occurs. “To reach an understanding in dialogue,” Gadamer writes, “is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s own point of view, but being transformed into a communication in which we do not remain what we were” (371).

In his *Truth and Method*, the interpreter and the text assume the role of partners in a dialogue, where the goal is to reach some kind of accord concerning the matter at hand: “Just as each interlocutor is trying to reach agreement on some subject with his partner, so also the interpreter is trying to understand what the text is saying” (370).

That which enables us to understand the text or the “other” is what Gadamer calls our *horizon* -- the larger context of meaning within which we are situated, and which suggests the localised, perspectival nature of knowing. To have a horizon, Gadamer explains, “means not being limited to what is nearby but being able to see beyond it” (301). Rather than think of this horizon as a prison from which there is no escape, Gadamer emphasises that the horizon can never be truly closed; rather, it “is something within which we move and that moves with us. Horizons change for a person who is moving” (303). While a horizon is limited and finite in the same sense that each human life is also finite, Gadamer insists that our horizon is nevertheless open, fluid, and changing (*ibid.*).

The aspect of Gadamer’s hermeneutics that is of particular interests to comparative political theorists can be brought to light once we pose the question of what happens when we try to understand a horizon that is other than our own. In so far as understanding can be seen as a process of coming to an agreement about a subject matter, Gadamer describes the process of coming into contact with another horizon as oriented toward achieving a “fusion of horizons.” It is important to note that Gadamer’s discussion of the horizon occurs in the section of *Truth and Method* devoted to explaining how we can come to understand the relationship between the interpreter and the text, or the present (which we inhabit) and the past (the tradition within which we place ourselves). “Are there really two different horizons here,” Gadamer (2004) asks, “the horizon within which the person seeking to understand lives and the historical horizon within which he places himself” (303)? For Gadamer, we would be wrong in assuming that the ability of an interpreter to understand a text from the past depends on her capacity to transpose herself into this distinct, alien horizon. What Gadamer seeks to establish is that the horizon of the present and that of the past are not entirely separate; rather, there is continuity between them. When we transpose ourselves into historical horizons, he writes,

[T]his does not entail passing into alien worlds unconnected in any way with our own; instead, they together constitute the one great horizon that moves from within and that, beyond the frontiers of the present, embraces the historical depths of our self-consciousness. Everything contained in the historical consciousness is in fact embraced by a single historical horizon. Our own past and that other past toward which our historical consciousness is directed help to shape this moving horizon out of which human life always lives and which determines it as heritage and tradition (Gadamer 2004, 303).

To understand an alien tradition requires that we have a historical horizon. But it is not the case that we acquire this horizon by an act of empathic transposition into a historical tradition. As Gadamer makes clear, we are always already situated within a horizon of meaning that allows us to transpose ourselves into another, alien tradition. When we attempt to understand a historically distant text, we move into its horizon while simultaneously bringing our horizon with us. Gadamer describes this process as akin to putting ourselves into someone else's shoes. It is only by placing ourselves (together with our horizon) in another's situation that we can "become aware of the otherness, the indissoluble individuality of the other person" (304). Transposing ourselves in this sense is not an act of empathy but "involves rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our particularity but also that of the other" (ibid). Applied to this context, the concept of horizon "expresses the superior breath of vision that the person who is trying to understand must have" (ibid). As Gadamer elaborates, "to acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand – not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and its truer proportion" (ibid). The attempt to understand the other, therefore, necessarily throws us back upon ourselves, to a reexamination of our presuppositions and historical tradition. This to and fro movement between self and other, between our present and the heritage of our past, leads to a deepening and widening of our horizon and, in the process, both self and other are transformed.

In rejecting the existence of ontologically closed, distinct, or reified horizons, Gadamer thereby also disallows the possibility of incommensurability and affirms the intrinsic openness of the hermeneutical experience. If the historical horizon is fluid so too is the horizon of the present.

But why speak of a fusion of horizons if there is no such thing as isolated, distinct horizons? As Gadamer asks, why not simply speak of the formation of a single horizon "whose bounds are set in the depths of tradition?" (305) Every encounter with tradition, Gadamer explains, "involves the experience of a tension between the text and the present" (ibid). Elsewhere in *Truth and Method* Gadamer describes this tension as the polarity between familiarity and strangeness (295). The task of hermeneutics is to consciously bring out this tension, this inbetweenness, not to conceal it "by attempting a naïve assimilation of the two" (305). This is why, Gadamer elaborates, "it is part of the hermeneutic approach to project a historical horizon that is different from the horizon of the present" (ibid). And as the historical horizon is projected, it is simultaneously superseded by our present horizon (306). By projection Gadamer here means the conscious act of reconstructing the past. Consciousness of the present, however, is inseparable from and requires consciousness of tradition – that is an awareness of the way in which the past is

contained in the present. This movement of projecting and superseding is another way of describing the process of understanding. It is in this sense that understanding can be said to involve a “fusion” of horizons. Stated differently, fusion, in this sense, refers to the active and ongoing nature of understanding, not to a static process. It refers to the creation of a common language of meaning that emerges between the interpreter and the text, between self and other, between past and present.

The upshot of Gadamer’s dialogic model for comparative political theory is that it places the interpreter in an attitude of openness towards the alien tradition. “Hermeneutical experience,” Gadamer reiterates, “is concerned with *tradition*. This is what is to be experienced. But tradition is not simply a process that experience teaches us to know and govern; it is *language* – i.e., it expresses itself like a Thou” (352; emphases in original). A Thou, Gadamer reminds us, is not an object but always stands in a certain relationship with us. In other words, for Gadamer the relationship between past and present (or between historically effected consciousness and tradition) has an analogue in the I-Thou relationship. Of the three modes in which the I can relate to the Thou, Gadamer favors the I-Thou relationship characterised by a genuine openness to the Thou. In human relationships, Gadamer argues, “the important thing is [...] to experience the Thou truly as Thou – i.e., not to overlook his claim but to let him really say something to us. Here is where openness belongs” (355). This openness, Gadamer clarifies, does not exist only for the person who speaks; rather, “anyone who listens is fundamentally open” (ibid). In this relationship, the I does not project its meaning on the Thou but lets the Thou address her. This mode of orientation to the other implies an openness that “wills to hear rather than to master.” It is an openness that recognises the possibility of being challenged, modified or transformed by the other. As Gadamer (1989) eloquently writes, “One must lose oneself in order to find oneself.” Importantly, “one never knows in advance what one will find oneself to be” (57).

The strong emphasis on non-mastery and non-domination that emerges from this account of the relationship between self and other is what comparative political theorists find attractive about Gadamer’s approach. In this account, as Richard Palmer summarises, the interpreter emerges not as one who “masters” what is in the text but as one who becomes the “servant” of the text. The interpreter “does not so much try to observe and see what is in the text as to follow, participate in, and ‘hear’ what is said by the text” (Palmer 1969, 208). On this view therefore – a view that I argue is also shared by proponents of CPT – Gadamer’s hermeneutics emerges as an approach that is geared towards restraining or chastening the interpreter’s “will to master.” As such, we can begin to see how Gadamer’s insistence that an interpreter should remain open to the voice of the other begins to lead us away from Orientalism and its hegemonic posture towards non-Western thought traditions.

While Gadamer's approach might be helpful in pointing to a way out of Orientalism, the element of his account that CPT scholars uncritically adopt is Gadamer's portrayal of dialogue as the necessary opposite of domination. In the following sections, I seek to show that the uncritical embrace of a Gadamerian notion of dialogue leads CPT to the conclusion that a commitment to dialogue will necessarily issue in more sympathetic and enhanced understanding of non-Western traditions of thought. My aim is to problematise this assumption by highlighting the ways in which dialogue may not always remain free from power and as such is not always non-dominative. To set the stage for my critical intervention, in the next section I outline Dallmayr's engagement with Gadamer's hermeneutics.

Dallmayr's Appropriation of Gadamer

While some scholars (Mehta 1985; Panikkar 1988; Kogler 1999) have questioned the applicability of Gadamerian hermeneutics to the context of cross-cultural interaction and exchange, Fred Dallmayr is among those who do not see any reason why Gadamer's model should be inapplicable to endeavors geared towards cross-cultural learning. To fully appreciate Dallmayr's contribution, I outline his attempt to rescue Gadamer from charges that his theory is ultimately unable to accommodate the thought of radical alterity (e.g., Haidu 1990; Bernasconi 1995).

In Defense of Gadamer

One of Dallmayr's first extended elaborations on the significance of Gadamerian hermeneutics to cross-cultural studies – and comparative political theory in particular – appears in his *Beyond Orientalism*. Rather than offer a comprehensive exegesis of Gadamer's magisterial *Truth and Method*, Dallmayr (1996) shifts the focus of attention to some of Gadamer's later work in which we can find his reflections and commentaries on “larger global and geocultural concerns” (40). The explicit focus on this dimension of Gadamer's work has as its goal the task of clarifying how philosophical hermeneutics can be extended to the realm of contemporary cross-cultural encounters. As Dallmayr notes, “Gadamer has persistently reflected and commented on the significance of European (or Western) culture, alerting readers both to its intrinsic grandeur and to its tragedy of impossible limitations” (ibid). Reading Gadamer alongside Jacques Derrida's late reflections on Europe in *The Other Heading*, Dallmayr discovers in their work the groundwork for a “hermeneutics of difference” – a hermeneutics that can serve as the foundation “for the emerging global city and a dialogically constructed global ecumenicism” (ibid).

Dallmayr acknowledges the presence of a kind of linguistic idealism in Gadamer's work up until and including the publication of his *Truth and Method*. Here Dallmayr is essentially referring to one of the most common critiques leveled at Gadamer's

dialogical hermeneutics, namely, the reliance on an implicit consensualism necessary for the eventual “fusion of horizons” between self and other, or reader and text, where alterity is ultimately overcome in favor of reaching some kind of harmonious agreement devoid of any conflict (ibid, 41; Dallmayr 2009, 27). As Robert Bernasconi (1995) has articulated this problem, “it is not clear whether Gadamer succeeds in freeing himself from the prejudice of representing difference or otherness as a problem to be resolved” or overcome (180). If the strange or the foreign is the initial precondition that sets the process of understanding in motion, there is a tendency in Gadamer’s theory to reduce alterity to a moment that is to be overcome in the search for a fusion of horizons. Bernasconi notes that Gadamer’s treatment of alterity has led to charges that the model of dialogue he elaborates is monological rather than dialogical (186).

While Dallmayr is sensitive to these charges, he believes that in many respects they are misleading and do not do justice to the complexity of Gadamerian hermeneutics. On Dallmayr’s account, a number of experiences contributed to Gadamer’s modification of his hermeneutic theory. Among the most formative Dallmayr identifies Gadamer’s turn to Heidegger’s later writings, his engagement with French post-structuralism, and his turn to the poetry of Paul Celan. Gadamer’s engagement with these traditions of thought led in his later writings to a “steady distantiating from fusionism in favor of a stronger recognition of otherness in the context of reciprocal encounter” (Dallmayr 1996, 32).

Turning to Gadamer’s late work on the poetry of Paul Celan, Dallmayr suggests that here readers can find a direct acknowledgement on Gadamer’s part of the non-transparency of language which can lead to a rupture or failure of (complete) understanding. If *Truth and Method* displays a tendency towards consensualism, Gadamer’s reading of Celan reveals a greater attentiveness to the “ambiguity, multivocality, and indeterminacy unleashed by the poetic text” (Dallmayr 1996, 44). Ruminating on the task of the interpreter when confronted with the hermetic poetry of Celan – a poetry which Celan himself described as a “message in a bottle”, implying that it is entirely up to the reader to decode that message and even to determine whether the bottle contains any message at all – Gadamer approached Celan’s poems by respecting their poetic distance. In Gadamer’s response to the otherness of Celan’s texts Dallmayr finds “a willingness to refrain from willful penetration, that is, a readiness to leave blank spaces intact and thus to honor the interlacing of said and unsaid and of word and silence” (ix).

In his later work, then, Gadamer acknowledges the possibility of non-communication (or ruptured communication) by highlighting the difficulties of reaching understanding. But the recognition that understanding can be disrupted or impeded is already present in his *Truth and Method*. As Dallmayr (1984) points out,

there are two “limits or boundaries of conversational understanding in Gadamer’s treatment” (199). The first of these limits becomes evident in those cases where “the effort at understanding is lacking or insufficiently developed,” or where there is no desire to reach understanding in the first place (*ibid*). For example, this occurs when the partners in dialogue, because of indifference or haste, are not concerned with promoting a true “I-Thou” relationship. In such instances communication is reduced to idle chatter where conversational exchanges consist of nothing more than the exchange of clichés and linguistic stereotypes. According to Dallmayr, this type of interpersonal indifference is also evident in scientific inquiry, where ordinary language is replaced by an artificial or technological idiom (199-200).

The second limit case becomes apparent in those situations where the desire to reach understanding is not lacking, but where there is difficulty in reaching it due to “the intricacy of an explored topic or from unfamiliarity with a given language” (200). As Gadamer (2004) himself states, it is precisely “in situations where coming to an understanding is disrupted or impeded [that] we first become conscious of the conditions of all understanding” (386). The encounter with a foreign-language text presents a special kind of barrier to understanding the overcoming of which necessitates the presence of a translator. In translation, there is always a gap between “the spirit of the original words and that of their reproduction”, a gap which can never be completely closed (Gadamer 2004, 386). As Gadamer correctly points out, “even the most faithful translation cannot remove the fundamental gulf between the two languages” (387). At every step of the translation process the interpreter is faced with difficult decisions. If a translator should choose to highlight a particular dimension of the text under examination, this means that she is simultaneously required to downplay other features of the text. This process of highlighting and downplaying is ongoing and continuous, and occurs even in those “borderline cases” where “something is in fact unclear” to the translator (Gadamer 2004, 388). As Gadamer explains, in such situations where there is lack of clarity (and lack of understanding), the interpreter is nonetheless required “to state how he understands” a given passage, text, etc (*ibid*). At the same time, however, since the translator “is always in the position of not being able to express all the dimensions of [the] text, [she] must make a constant renunciation” (*ibid*).

Gadamer is right to highlight the fact that “every translation that takes its task seriously is at once clearer and flatter than the original. Even if it is a masterly re-creation, it must lack some of the overtones that vibrate in the original” (*ibid*). Yet as Dallmayr (1984) points out, despite the fact that the distance between the original and its translation appears unbridgeable, ultimately for Gadamer “translation presents no absolute bar to understanding and only highlights general hermeneutical dilemmas” (200). On Dallmayr’s account, rather than translation

Gadamer viewed poetry or poetic language as a more extreme type of unfamiliarity and an obstacle to understanding. Gadamer defines poetry “not as a mode of representation or description, but as a mode of disclosure ‘opening up a world of the divine and human’ or a ‘new vision of the world’” (Dallmayr 1984, 200). But just as was the case with translation, in *Truth and Method* Gadamer ultimately downplays “the innovative and radically unfamiliar character of poetry” suggesting instead that the “poetic word” is just an “intensification of everyday speech” (quoted in Dallmayr 1984, 200).

Against this background, we gain a clearer picture of how Gadamer refined his understanding of poetry and poetic exegesis in his later work on Paul Celan. On Dallmayr’s reading, the engagement with the “hermetic nonexpressiveness” of Celan’s poems led to a modification of Gadamer’s notion of understanding. Gone is the emphasis on a harmonious fusion of horizons; in its place is a greater attentiveness to the obstacles that impede communication. In the case of Celan’s work, these obstacles include the interpreter’s (reader’s) confrontation with a type of poetry that is cryptic, impenetrable, and full of idioms and manipulations of the German language. How does one translate, how does one understand the impenetrable? Indeed, how does one engage with a poetry that “approaches...the breathless stillness of silence in the word turned cryptic cipher” (Gadamer quoted in Dallmayr 1996, 42)?

Gadamer counseled that on such occasions the reader must display a willingness to listen to the “breathless stillness of the word” (Dallmayr 1996, 42). At the same time, Gadamer also cautioned that sensitivity to the opacity of texts need not mean that we must abandon the search for understanding. On the contrary, as Dallmayr points out, Gadamer sought to steer a path between understanding and non-understanding, or between complete appropriation and renunciation – i.e., a middle course that would be sensitive to the silences of language and leave “blank spaces intact” (44). As Dallmayr interprets him, Gadamer did not simply wish to advocate the renunciation of understanding when confronted with the impenetrability of Celan’s poetry. For Gadamer it is not enough “merely to register the failure or rupture of understanding; rather, what is needed is an attempt to look for possible points of entry and then to inquire in which manner and how far understanding may be able to penetrate” (Dallmayr 1996, 44). The goal of this type of interpretation “is not to render transparent what is (and must remain) concealed, but rather to comprehend and respect the complex interlacing of transparency and non-transparency in poetic texts” (ibid).

For Dallmayr, Gadamer’s approach to the poetry of Celan and his emphasis on “interpretive perseverance” is instructive as it both advocates and reflects a “disposition or a ‘good will’ to understanding, [i.e.] a disinclination to let rupture

or estrangement have the last word” (44-5). What Dallmayr finds valuable about Gadamer’s hermeneutical engagement with Celan is not only his emphasis on the importance of being attentive to the “said” as well as to the “unsaid,” but also the fact that in his later work Gadamer “tends to underscore [the] embeddedness in a common world” of readers and texts (45). This is important, Dallmayr argues, as it suggests that Gadamer ultimately does not endorse a radical, unbridgeable separation between interpreters and texts. Instead he develops a notion of understanding where exegesis is now understood as a kind of “struggle or [...] agonistic engagement, proceeding along the pathway not so much of a pre-established consensus but of something like an “agonistic dialogue” (ibid).

While Gadamer makes much of the fact that “interpretive honesty” demands that in those instances when one is confronted with the radical otherness of a text it is preferable to admit that one does not understand, he does not seek to elevate non-understanding into a general maxim nor to endorse a subjective relativism. Rather, in response to some of his critics Gadamer sought to refine his theory of understanding by re-elaborating hermeneutics as a type of “agonal engagement” or an “engaged dialogical encounter” (Dallmayr 1996, 49). Gadamer likens the type of dialogic encounter he has in mind to the Socratic method of self-reflection through questioning and mutual contestation. In Socrates Gadamer finds an approach to hermeneutic inquiry which counsels that one must seek to understand the other even at the risk of self-critique; given that all understanding involves a kind of stepping outside oneself and a movement towards the other, an agonal engagement entails that one must be willing to admit that one could be in the wrong and, by extension, that the other could be right (48-9).

The Legacy of Europe

Viewed as an agonal engagement, Gadamer’s hermeneutics has resonance beyond the realm of textual interpretation. As Dallmayr (1996) suggests, Gadamer’s “later writings on hermeneutical understanding are pertinent to our emerging ‘global city,’ to an incipient world order marked by a contestation among cultures and by a growing resistance to one-sided Western hegemony” (49). Dallmayr distills Gadamer’s views on the socio-political significance of contemporary cross-cultural encounters from *The Legacy of Europe (Das Erbe Europas)*, a study published almost a decade after Gadamer’s encounter with Derrida. In these essays, Gadamer concerned himself with the status and role of Europe in the emerging context of globalisation and European unification. As Dallmayr writes, “the issue is neither to distance the other into the indifference of externality nor to absorb or appropriate otherness in an imperialistic gesture” (52). Dallmayr follows Gadamer in looking to the history of Europe as offering a model for the type of coexistence or co-being that both advocate. As Gadamer argues, “it is one of the special advantages

of Europe that – more than elsewhere – her inhabitants have been able or were compelled to learn how to live with others, even if the others were very different” (quoted in Dallmayr 1996, 52). Indeed, the coexistence of a great diversity of nations, cultures, languages and religions on the European continent is, for Gadamer, the distinctive legacy and “promise” of Europe to the world and the emerging world culture. Specifically, he argued that the special “gift” that Europe could bequeath to the rest of the world was its “multicultural and multilingual composition [...] its historical practice of cohabitation with otherness in a narrow space” (Dallmayr 2009, 32). Experienced as a constant struggle and challenge, this cohabitation, Gadamer argued, implies a lesson for humanity at large. Based on these observations, Gadamer concludes that the European model of “unity in diversity” – a model characteristic of hermeneutical dialogue where, coming from different backgrounds, each partner seeks to discern the other’s meaning – must become a global formula, one that should “be extended to the whole world – to include China, India, and also Muslim cultures” (Gadamer quoted in Dallmayr 2009, 33). Following Gadamer, Dallmayr uncritically embraces this proposal.

Dallmayr is perhaps too generous in his interpretation of Gadamer’s reflections on Europe. To support the claim that Europe, more than any other place in the world, offers a successful example of coexistence, easily opens both to charges of historical amnesia as well as Eurocentrism. One need only remember the devastating wars of religion that decimated the continent in the 16th and 17th centuries, along with the long history of religious persecution in the region, to look with some amount of suspicion on this claim. Moving closer to our own time, the rise over the past decade of Islamophobia and nationalistic right-wing parties in Europe casts further doubt on Gadamer’s claim. As such, one wonders whether Gadamer’s elevation of Europe to the status of model and teacher for the rest of the world – and Dallmayr’s ringing endorsement of it – does not in the end jeopardise the very exit from Orientalism/Eurocentrism that hermeneutics promises to offer.

If hermeneutics is premised on the self’s openness to the perspectives of the other, why does Gadamer not engage with those other voices that, as Dallmayr (1993) recognises, have not experienced Europe (and the West) as the “welter of cultural diversity and multiplicity, but rather as a monolithic structure bent on standardising the globe under the banner of Western science, technology, and industry” (525)? In an earlier iteration of the same argument, Dallmayr (1993) acknowledges that Gadamer’s vision of the legacy of Europe must be counterbalanced against another European/Western legacy, namely, the legacy of “imperialism, colonialism and politico-economic spoilage” (525). What seems like an opening towards a more balanced assessment of the European tradition is quickly foreclosed when Dallmayr writes that an emphasis on this second, negative legacy threatens to “obliterate

Europe's more benign and humanistic contributions" (ibid). To illustrate this point, Dallmayr directs readers to Samir Amin's critique of Eurocentrism, arguing that Amin's portrayal of modern Western culture as synonymous with capitalist exploitation and domination works to hide from view the "kinder" face of the West. For Dallmayr (1993), Amin's approach is ultimately detrimental for cross-cultural encounters. "Viewed strictly from the vantage point of Eurocentrism," Dallmayr writes, "modern Europe no longer is a partner in cross-cultural dialogue, but an enemy to be defeated and destroyed" (357).

Dallmayr offers Amin's book as an exemplar of a narrow perspective that fails to adequately appreciate the positive, non-dominative, and non-imperial elements present in the history of the West. In other words, as a kind of perspective that falls short of Gadamer's dialogic hermeneutics. And yet, Amin's book, in so far as it seeks to shed light on an alternative, non-Eurocentric conception of world history – one that seeks to include previously marginalised voices into the picture – can be viewed precisely as the kind of work that should be welcomed by Dallmayr. Far from seeking to portray Europe as an enemy that needs to be defeated and destroyed, Amin sought to show why and how modernity (and capitalism) came to be perceived as phenomena that could only have emerged in the West (from where they could then be "gifted" to the rest of the world). To challenge, as Amin's book does, the West's dominant self-understanding is not at all the same as calling for the West's destruction. That Dallmayr should draw this conclusion from Amin's text seems puzzling. After all, does not the central premise of philosophical hermeneutics tell us that, in the encounter between self and other, one must risk one's prejudices, hold them open to revision, correction, and possible modification? If we see Amin's book as the "other" that challenges the Western "self" that Dallmayr seeks to defend, then in Dallmayr's hasty dismissal of Amin's text – a dismissal that amounts to a rejection of the postcolonial perspective – I believe we are witness to a clear betrayal of the hermeneutic potential that he otherwise so vehemently defends. Because Dallmayr refuses to be challenged by Samir Amin's perspective, here we come across one of the limit cases that impede the possibility of genuine, mutually transformative dialogue I discussed earlier. That is to say, here we are confronted with a situation in which, as Gadamer said, there is no real desire to reach understanding in the first place, at least no such desire on the part of one of the interlocutors.

Implications

There are three important elements that emerge from Dallmayr's reading of Gadamer that have resonance for the enterprise of comparative political theory. First, Dallmayr embraces an understanding of dialogue as "agonistic," a view that he clearly derives from Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy. Modeled on Socratic

dialogue, an agonistic dialogue depends on our willingness to risk our prejudices and a readiness to admit that we may in fact be wrong. Dallmayr comes to this position via an attempt to “rescue” Gadamer from charges that his hermeneutic theory portrays the process of understanding as a smooth blending of views devoid of any struggle or conflict. Dallmayr shows us that Gadamer acknowledged the existence of obstacles that can impede understanding, and guides readers towards the conclusion that the best interpretive approach is a dialogic one, i.e., one that steers a middle course between “understanding and non-understanding” or between “appropriation and renunciation.”

Dallmayr (2009) makes recourse to similar polarities when he defines dialogue as the “exploration of the ‘otherness’ of interlocutors on the far side of either assimilation or exclusion” (23). While Dallmayr is right to suggest that one should not abandon the search for understanding even when confronted with the opacity of otherness, his proposal that one should strive to aim for this middle ground is devoid of any specificity. For example, what would such a middle ground look like? Dallmayr never broaches such questions. Instead, readers are left to conclude that some form of understanding will occur regardless of the obstacles that may be placed in its path. In this sense, Dallmayr’s middle ground begins to look very much like the pole of complete, undistorted understanding that he wishes to avoid. What is lacking in both Gadamer and Dallmayr is an adequate conceptualisation of what stands in the way and impedes (cross-cultural) understanding in the contemporary world.

A second, related element that Dallmayr draws from Gadamer’s hermeneutics is the notion of “good will,” i.e. the premise that understanding in dialogue will not be reached unless both parties display a “good will” to try to understand one another. Such an orientation towards one’s interlocutor implies a readiness and willingness to listen to what one’s interlocutor has to say. As was the case with his uncritical embrace of Gadamerian dialogue, in this case Dallmayr similarly does not interrogate this assumption. For example, he overlooks the possibility that even with “good will” we may still impose hierarchical biases on what we are seeking to understand with “openness.” Finally, Dallmayr’s analysis of the conflicting legacies of Europe – its history of multicultural coexistence on the one hand, and its imperial past on the other – illustrates well some of the political implications of the embrace of philosophical hermeneutics. In insisting on the importance of highlighting the “good,” anti-imperial legacy of Europe, Dallmayr simultaneously works to deemphasise the negative elements in European history.

It is crucial to note that Dallmayr invokes Gadamer’s writings in *The Legacy of Europe* on three separate occasions, in the course of elaborating on the work of the German thinker. As I discussed earlier, in his 1993 essay titled “Self and Other:

Gadamer and the Hermeneutics of Difference,” Dallmayr references Europe’s imperialist legacy as a way of tempering Gadamer’s one-sided impressions about Europe’s multiculturalism, but quickly takes the discussion in a different direction. A revised version of the same argument appears in *Beyond Orientalism* (1996), and more recently in Dallmayr’s 2009 article. What stands out in these two later iterations of the argument is that here the references to Europe’s imperialist legacy are entirely left out. Although this may not have been Dallmayr’s explicit goal, the fact that he chose to withhold the imperialist dimension of Western history could easily be interpreted as an attempt to cleanse the West of its less flattering historical legacy. This disavowal forces us to raise anew the question of the possibility of critique within the framework of Gadamerian hermeneutics.

The Power in Dialogue

In the previous sections I drew attention to the value of Gadamer’s model of understanding as elaborated in the work of Dallmayr. For Dallmayr, the greatest strength of philosophical hermeneutics is its open-ended nature and the fact that it is “hospitable to multiple and expanding horizons” (Dallmayr 2002, 27). Dallmayr finds especially appealing Gadamer’s emphasis on the fact that, in dialogue, no one has definitive answers. Instead, the attention shifts to questioning and remaining open to being questioned (be it by the text or by another person). In the context of CPT this means that no one civilisation can claim a monopoly on truth.

In this section I offer an example of a concrete hermeneutical encounter as a way of theorising the kind of self-disruption comparative political theorists speak of. I draw my example from Joshua Casteel’s book, *Letters from Abu Ghraib*, a collection of email messages that Casteel sent to his family and friends while he served as a U.S. Army interrogator and Arabic translator at Abu Ghraib from June 2004 to January 2005. The dialogic exchange described below highlights the positive impacts of the kind of self-disruption extolled by comparative political theorists, but also challenges the Gadamerian framework of dialogue on which they rely.

The Interrogator and the Detainee

Joshua Casteel was raised in an Evangelical Christian household where, as he recounts, he was taught to equate love of country with love of God. Coming from a military family, he describes himself as “a child of home-schooling and Bible quizzing” (Casteel 2008a, 72). As he writes, “I was not supposed to be the kid who gets upset by violence, ambition and proto-imperialism...I was supposed to ascend the ranks of the military, then the ranks of Washington” (ibid). His plans were derailed. Casteel enlisted in the army soon after September 11th, 2001 and found himself stationed at Abu Ghraib as part of the “clean up” unit sent to overhaul the

prison in the wake of the 2004 prisoner abuse scandal. A deeply religious man, a reader of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Jacques Derrida, the collection of emails Casteel sent to his friends and family chronicle his struggle to reconcile his Christianity with the fact of war. While the letters themselves do not contain much information about daily life at Abu Ghraib, they nevertheless grant readers access to Casteel's inner life. On the one hand, we see a 24-year-old man torn between the deception integral to his line of work as interrogator and his Christian obligation to tell the truth. We also catch glimpses of an idealistic (even self-righteous) individual eager to depart for Abu Ghraib, confident that nothing like the prisoner abuse would occur under his watch. At the same time we also become privy to his profound doubts, to the side of him that wonders "what a blond, blue-eyed Iowan boy is doing in Iraq in the first place...with Caesar's body armor and an M-16" (Casteel 2008b, 4). Readers hear Casteel equate his job as interrogator to that of a Father Confessor: "As a confessor you cannot coerce a person to reveal that which they wish to hide. A confessor's aim is to help the one confessing to be sincere. [...] I do not coerce" (14, 36). A few emails later, in an email sent to his father, this self-righteous tone gives way to a profound doubt: "Being a man's inquisitor in the name of secular justice feels so often like fraud (27). [...] I am constantly falsely accusing people of things, using a man's emotions of vengeance for self-gain. I am an intimate partner in the killing of men without trial" (90). The Father Confessor has become an inquisitor; the defender of truth has become a deceiver. The distinctions begin to blur.

One encounter in particular during his time at Abu Ghraib proved transformative for Casteel. After five months of interrogating mostly innocent Iraqis (schoolboys, taxi-drivers, fathers, and Imams), it was during one such interrogation that Casteel finally came face to face with a self-declared jihadist, a 22-year-old Saudi Arabian man who had been picked up by coalition forces just two weeks after he had entered Iraq. "So, I just experienced why it is I am here in Iraq," Casteel writes. "I just 'met' my reason – a young foreign jihadist who said he might kill me if he had the chance (that is, as long as I am a US soldier in Muslim lands)" (101). From the very start of the interrogation, Casteel recounts that he was frustrated by the Saudi Arabian man, namely, by the fact that he was submitting to Casteel's authority not out of a feeling of fear but quite willingly, even with a show of confidence. Unable to "trip up" the jihadist with his rapid stream of verbally aggressive questioning, Casteel decides to switch tactics and asks the man why he had come to Iraq to kill. The reply comes in the form of an unexpected question, "Why did *you* [Joshua] come here to kill?" (Casteel 2007). From this point onwards the entire dynamic of the interrogation changes. The questioner becomes the questioned.

Casteel responds that he had come to defend the Iraqi people, and out of a duty to his country. The Saudi man challenges Casteel by saying, "If the military didn't

want people to be killed they would have sent someone else, not soldiers. Soldiers are sent when people need to be killed” (Casteel 2007). Casteel is struck by the irony of the situation. Two men, an interrogator and a prisoner, both claiming to have come to Iraq to do what each understood to be their respective duty; both devoted to their religions, and both willing to kill to defend their people. Attempting to convert Casteel to Islam, the jihadist challenges Casteel’s beliefs as a Christian: “You said you are a Christian, but you don’t follow the teachings of Jesus Christ. Your Lord, our prophet Isa, tells you to turn the other cheek, to love those who hate you. Why do you not do this?” (Casteel 2008b, 102) It is at this moment, Casteel recounts, that he realised the Saudi man was right. As he writes, “I lacked the power to challenge him in any way that I did not challenge myself, because such ideas of ‘love’ and ‘forgiveness’ and ‘compassion’ are not fully manifest and incarnate in me, tangibly and practically to be seen and felt” (ibid). Giving him what essentially amounted to a lesson about The Sermon on the Mount, the jihadist’s challenge forced Casteel into the realisation that he was not living by the principles he preached. Realising that he had lost all objectivity as an interrogator, Casteel stops the interrogation: “I left and I prayed I would be given the chance to see him one day in the future when I could say, ‘I left that world behind me, so can you’” (102). As he recounts, he had stopped the interrogation because he had begun to see the Saudi man as his counterpart, as someone who was trying to convert him in the same way that Casteel was trying to convert the jihadist.

Casteel does not tell readers what became of the Saudi man. But we do learn that this encounter crystallised Casteel’s decision to apply for conscientious objector status. His application was approved, and he was honorably discharged from the army in 2005. He converted to Catholicism soon after. Following his return from Iraq, Casteel became an outspoken critic of the war and joined the Iraq Veterans Against the War. In 2011 he was diagnosed with a rare form of lung cancer, an illness which he believed was a result of being exposed to the toxic fumes from the burn pits in Iraq. Casteel passed away in August 2012 at the age of 32.

What can we learn from this encounter between the Christian interrogator and the Saudi jihadist? Does it illustrate the Gadamerian fusion of horizons, or does it exemplify a missed encounter? I use this example in order to begin problematising the notion of dialogue advanced by CPT scholars. Dialogue can take on many forms, depending on the interlocutors, the subject matter discussed, and the location where the dialogue takes place. Depending on who is authorised to speak, dialogues may promote exclusion just as much as they can encourage the inclusion of certain voices. The encounter just described offers an example of the kind of transformative self-disruption that may occur in the course of a meeting with the new and unfamiliar. As CPT scholars would tell us, such disruptions can lead to

profound transformations of self, ultimately resulting in the loss of the will to dominate. In different ways, all of these characteristics are certainly recognisable in the context of the encounter between the interrogator and the detainee. In the case of Casteel, the encounter leads him to the realisation that his work as a military interrogator is incompatible with his deeper aspiration to follow and live by the teachings of the Gospel. Ultimately, this leads him to renounce his military life, adopt a new religion, and become a critic of the war.

How does Casteel's response to the encounter measure up against the kind of transformation that Euben (1999), Dallmayr, Godrej, and other CPT scholars argue is ultimately beneficial for the self? Is this encounter a dialogue of the sort that, following Gadamer, comparative political theorists embrace? To answer these questions we must recall the three main components of dialogue that Gadamer posits. The first requirement for dialogue is that "the partners do not talk at cross purposes" (Gadamer 2004, 360). As Gadamer elaborates, "to conduct a [dialogue] means to allow oneself to be conducted by the subject matter to which the partners in the dialogue are oriented" (360-361). A "genuine" dialogue, therefore, has as its main objective the sincere attempt by each participant to unravel the truth with regards to the subject matter (Swartz and Cilliers 2003, 3). Although Gadamer argues that in order to achieve understanding in dialogue there must be an explicit attempt to reach agreement about the subject matter (292), nevertheless, and as Lauren Barthold (2010) points out, this does not mean that agreement will be reached easily or at the expense of the otherness of the other (103). In dialogue we open ourselves to a new experience. Because for Gadamer (2004) all experience has the character of productive negativity, the openness of dialogue implies that we also expose ourselves to suffering (347). We risk our prejudices, we risk critique, and we risk being misunderstood.

A second fundamental precondition for dialogue is the "good will" of the participants to try to understand one another (Gadamer 1989, 33). When invoking the notion of good will Gadamer refers to Plato's "eumeneis elenchoi" – the hermeneutical attitude of openness, of acknowledging that we may have something to learn from the other. As Gadamer explains, in a genuine dialogue "one does not go about identifying the weaknesses of what another person says in order to prove that one is right, but one seeks instead as far as possible to strengthen the other's viewpoint so that what the other person has to say becomes illuminating" (55). Different from an argument, the aim of dialogue is not to "argue the other person down," to score points, or to win them over to one's side; rather, the goal is to consider the weight of the other person's opinion (Gadamer 2004, 361). This implies a willingness to listen to what the other person has to say as well as to offer reasons and justifications for one's view (Barthold 2010, 106). Finally, a third pre-condition

for dialogue requires an admission of ignorance on the part of both interlocutors akin to Socrates' declaration that "one knows that one doesn't know." It suggests forsaking the position that one already knows the answer in advance.

The encounter between Casteel and the detainee both fulfills but also problematises the terms of the Gadamerian notion of dialogue. Because dialogue has the structure of play, Gadamer argues that we cannot be forced into a dialogue but already find ourselves in it. Play presupposes a willingness to play on the part of the participants. But, as Gadamer (2004) notes, "even within his readiness to play [the player] makes a choice. He chooses this game rather than that" (107). Gadamer defines play as a process that does "not have its being in the player's consciousness or attitude." On the contrary, "play draws him into its dominion and fills him with its spirit". In turn, "the player experiences the game as a reality that surpasses him" (109). In order to truly play, we must allow ourselves to be swept away into play, to be drawn away from ourselves – i.e. away from our perspective but not from our historical situatedness. As Gadamer writes, the attraction of a game consists in the fact that it masters the players. Play plays us, so to speak (106).

Conclusion

The encounter discussed above takes place under conditions of war. One of the interlocutors (the detainee) has no other choice but to submit to the interrogation. In this sense, the encounter and ensuing dialogue are forced, staged, and scripted. There is clear evidence of coercion in so far as the detainee is forced to sit on his hand and to look straight ahead. All of these elements violate the Gadamerian requirements for dialogue. However, we also know that the reason for Casteel's initial frustration with the detainee is that the latter, in confidently submitting to Casteel's orders, was quite willing to play the interrogation game. It is this very openness that seems to have altered the course of the conversation, taking it in a direction that could hardly have been anticipated by Casteel. Such openness to experience and the unexpected outcome fit well into Gadamer's schema. As it turns out, in having to explain and justify his decision to come to Iraq, Casteel is forced into realising the fundamental contradiction between his service as a soldier and his desire to live according to the teachings of Jesus Christ, to love his enemies, to turn the other cheek. In the jihadist's accusation Casteel catches sight of that other dimension of his self (here also understood in the broader sense of his own culture and tradition) – the non-militaristic aspect of his self, the self that had to be suppressed for the sake of assuming an imperial identity.

In its effect on Casteel, this exchange perhaps represents the best of what comparative political theorists suggest can happen as a result of a hermeneutic encounter – a transformative self-critique that does not leave us as we were before. At the same

time, Casteel's encounter with the detainee also points to a weakness in the CPT literature. CPT scholars have not made clear how the disruptions they argue occur in the process of crossing borders into "other" perspectives have been used to redefine or even critique existing political thought. Although comparative political theorists conceptualise the process of dialogue as a back and forth movement between "self" and "other," they have been reluctant to clarify the impact of this dialogue for the canon of political thought. This suggests two things: either such an impact has not occurred, which means that dialogues need not always be self-transformative; or that this impact has been ignored. If the latter is the case, then this brings us close to Goto-Jones's (2013) suggestion that comparative political theory is simply a code name for "colonial tolerance" (160).

The encounter between Casteel and the detainee is instructive in another way as well. It shows that what the metaphor of play and the notion of dialogue miss in this context is the fact that in the give-and-take of the interrogation, any question, any answer may determine the detainee's fate. This aspect of power – having power over someone's life – is hidden from view in Gadamer's conceptualisation of dialogue. In many respects, power is also held at a distance in Casteel's *Letters from Abu Ghraib*. As such, it becomes conspicuous by its absence. But it also becomes apparent in Casteel's attempt to re-describe his job as interrogator as that of a father confessor:

A confessor provides the opportunity for a safe disclosure, offers a way out of secrecy. Interrogation is like a chess match, a battle of wits. But it is also a relationship of understanding, where I try to use a person's internal belief scheme to encourage them to narrate dishonorable actions with their own words. This tactic takes far more time and patience, but is far more effective in the long run and far more unsettling to the extremist Muslim who has been trained to prepare for torture. The aggressive approach reinforces their preconceptions that America is Satan and that the coalition is a Zionist conspiracy bent on their destruction. Empathy, if it is authentic itself, is far more unsettling, and forces a person to question the legitimacy of their training and indoctrination (Casteel 2008b, 32).

Casteel's *Letters from Abu Ghraib* opens up a tension. On the one hand, it shows that dialogue need not be incompatible with military confrontation. In so far as interrogation is a form of dialogue, it goes hand-in-hand with war. On the other hand, as I have already shown, the book also offers an example of the transformative aspect of dialogue emphasised by comparative political theorists. Importantly, in trying to separate the coercive aspect of interrogation from the empathetic dimension that he associates with the role of father confessor Casteel, perhaps unwittingly, ends up showing how the two roles actually blur. In the context of the war, rather than being its opposite, the father confessor is simply the "kinder" face of empire.

In the introduction to this paper I referenced Dallmayr's separation between dialogue and power, which is evident in his declaration that dialogue offers the only alternative to military confrontation. In many respects, this paper has sought to highlight the ways in which comparative political theory has constructed its identity by consciously drawing a sharp dividing line between dialogue and power. But in order to accomplish this move, CPT has had to portray its "other" (the Western canon) as ethnocentric and exclusive so that it (CPT) could define itself as global and inclusive (see Goto-Jones 2013). In doing so, however, it has become blind to the fact that dialogue need not be incompatible with mastery and the will to power.

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