Engaged Political Theory for Our Americas: Philosophizing the Black and Spanish Pacifics

Abstract
This project builds on recent efforts by the philosophical community to engage long-ignored voices, to democratize philosophy, and to philosophize neglected aspects of democracy in the Americas. We propose by it to contribute to engaged political philosophy, which spotlights the ideas of scholars in the Global South and at Minority-Serving Institutions, engages the world’s many sources of ideas and institutes, responds to the calls of social movements for ideas that they can use, and partners with the disinherited to combat injustices. We are a coalition of political philosophers coming from the newly-formed Engaged Political Theory Working Group and the Latin American Seminar for Political Philosophy. In this project, we plan to host a conference, held in Mexico City, on the philosophical impacts of seeing our Americas as shaped by Black Americans’ ventures in the Pacific, and by appreciating the key role played by Spanish America in Pacific history.

Basic Information
Project Coordinator(s)
Thomas Donahue-Ochoa

Steering Committee
- Juan Espíndola (Philosophy Institute, UNAM-Mexico City)
- Ashwini Vasanthakumar (Queen’s Law School)

Funding Amount Requested
$3,000.00

Expected Project Completion Date
October 2024

Project Description
How can American philosophy embrace viewpoints that are not Eurocentric, or non-bourgeois, or not racially White? How can we deal fairly with philosophers in the Global South, or at Minority-Serving Institutions? Many have charged us with long sidelining those viewpoints and those philosophers. For when we debate theoretical questions, Eurocentric posits and bourgeois premises have long crowded out others. And when colleagues at MSIs, or in the Global South, have joined those debates, many of us long expected them to make new uses of old theories, but balked when they instead offered sets of ideas that "we" might adopt. To be sure, we have accepted some frameworks built upon such viewpoints—like Black radicalism, working-class socialism, or Subaltern Studies. But these we long thought shed light only on the experiences of those over whom (as we thought) the elite North Atlantic prevails. Thus until lately, we refused to see the non-Euroish, non-bourgeois, or non-White worlds as centers of thought and action.
Instead, we long treated those worlds, their thought-ways, and their practices as the margins of what’s important.

In this, political philosophy may bear even more blame than the rest of the discipline. For metaphysics and epistemology have long accepted, in principle, that Buddhist logic or Mulla Sadra’s noetics have much to offer North Atlantic M&E. And ethics and moral psychology have long acknowledged the usefulness of Confucian concepts like junzi or li for understanding questions of virtue. Comparative and “non-Western” philosophy are small but flourishing enterprises in these areas of specialization. But political philosophy has largely resisted these trends. We political theorists long touted Euroish, White, or bourgeois viewpoints as birthing the best that has been thought and argued about the fundamental questions of politics. Hence our AOS, as practiced in North America and the North Atlantic-centered world, has long centered on paradigm cases like Rawls’s “Theory of Justice,” Sen’s “Development as Freedom,” or Nussbaum’s Sex and Social Justice. While for many decades, it sidelined works like Gandhi’s “Hind Swaraj,” MLK’s “Beyond Vietnam,” Huda Sha’arawi’s “Harem Years,” Booker T. Washington’s ”Atlanta Exhibition Speech,” or Kang Youwei’s ”Great Community.”

But at last, change has come. A growing number of political and legal theorists in the Americas now assert that each of these works—and the viewpoints from which they hail—richens political thought. Hence these scholars seek to reconnect political theory; they undo its soldering to elite North Atlantic frames and notions, rewiring it to trace the network of hubs and switches that “the margins” have always composed. Within this movement, many now take up “engaged political theory.” The latter spotlights the ideas of scholars in the Global South and at Minority-Serving Institutions, engages the world’s many sources of ideas and institutes, responds to the calls of social movements for ideas that they can use, and partners with the disinherited to combat injustices. Thereby, it reconnects theory, by centering the so-called “margins.”

In brief, engaged political theory aims:

(1) To expand political theory's global reach, by partnering with ideas, voices, and movements that have been most affected by injustices.

(2) To foster the use of engaged approaches to theorizing. Among these are delving into archives compiled by the downtrodden, community-driven fieldwork, participatory action research, ethnography, structured interviews, public philosophy, and movement-requested thinking.

(3) To re-center "marginal" ideas and practices within political theory. By using its methods to address problems that elite academe long thought distinct to those most affected by injustices.

(4) To engage broad publics. First, by making our results readable and viewable. Second, by treating issues and ideas that people in the streets care about; and especially those facing unjust structures. Third, by fusing action and inquiry, through working with community leaders and members, with policy-makers and -takers, and with teachers and activist-intellectuals.

This project advances engaged political theory from and for our Americas. Led by Tom Donahue-Ochoa Juan Espindola, and Ashwini Vasanthakumar, the project is currently supported by a generous 14K USD internal fund provided by Haverford, Bryn Mawr, and Swarthmore Colleges. It has already created a website (reconnectingtheory.org) and hosted a number of events, including a February 2023 symposium on engaged approaches to transitional justice at the Institute for Philosophical Research at UNAM in Mexico City. For the 2023-24 academic year, with the internal Haverford funding and funds we are seeking from
other sources, we plan to hold in Mexico City two workshops on how the Global South is being remolded by new technologies. These events would feature scholars from across the Western Hemisphere. They would be held in March and August of 2024, and would bring together members of the Latin American Seminar on Political Philosophy and of the Engaged Political Theory Working Group, a just-formed group of scholars largely based in the U. S. and Canada. The Seminar includes political theorists at several universities in cities like Bogotá, Buenos Aires, and Santiago de Chile. The Working Group includes theorists based at HBCUs and other MSIs in the United States. Both workshops would also feature colleagues from ITAM and U. Panamericana, both in Mexico City. In convening these scholars, this project aims to surmount some of the barriers that colleagues in the Global South and at MSIs have faced in getting American academe to credit their work. The Seminar, for instance, has done much to break down those barriers. And the project also aims to convene thinkers working from many of the diverse viewpoints found in our Americas.

Proposal for APA Small Grant for 2024-25: Engaged Philosophy of the Black and Spanish Pacifics

Those are our plans for 2023-24. To build on this momentum in 2024-25, we are seeking from the APA a 3000 USD grant, to fund a conference on engaged philosophy of the Black and Spanish Pacifics. Consider one unfortunate effect of Anglophone and North Atlantic hegemony in the realm of ideas. This is that it makes people forget how the Pacific Ocean did (and still does) just as much to connect world history and the global flow of ideas as the Silk and Spice Routes between the East of Asia and the West of Africa and Europe. In fact, ever since Polynesians and natives of today’s Ecuador and Colombia sailed to meet each other in the mid-Pacific, sometime in the 13th century CE, Oceania and East Asia have been in constant contact with the Americas. And the latter have been in touch with Europe since at least 1000 CE, when Leif Ericsson settled at Vinland and interacted with the Mi’kmaq people there; he was repeatedly followed in this by Icelandic fishermen and Basque cod fishers, who often visited the shores of today’s Newfoundland. Moreover, the indigenous peoples of the Americas were highly interconnected, through trade, migration, and news-sharing. So it is likely that the peoples of Mesoamerica (including the Aztecs and the Mayas) knew of the Northeastern Woodlanders’ contacts with the Icelanders. And it’s also likely that they knew of the early Incas’ contacts with the Polynesians. For Mesoamerica was involved in complex trade networks with peoples in the far reaches of North and South America. Indeed, this might explain why the Aztecs told a legend of how, in ancient times, blond-haired and blue-eyed settlers had come to the shores of the Americas. They might have been thinking of the tales they might have heard of Ericsson’s Vinland settlement. For news of that settlement might well have been relayed to them through the north-south trade and news networks of the Americas.

These findings challenge a widespread notion of world history, according to which “the Old World” (read: Afro-Eurasia) was thoroughly interconnected from antiquity forward, but that “the New World” (read: the Americas) were, until the European conquest, cut off from the rest of the world. On this notion, indeed, the peoples of “the New World” were not even interconnected among themselves! In centering these findings against that notion of world history, we find reasons to abandon the concepts Old and New Worlds. For we also know that the Polynesians who seem to have met the Incas somewhere in the eastern Pacific were interconnected with the Malay Archipelago, and thence with the rest of Asia. Instead, we may rework prevailing images of the Americas. They can be seen, not as the long-uncontacted fringe of a world centered on Afro-Eurasia, but rather as centers in their own right. In this, we are helped by realizing that the name “Americas” might actually be of indigenous origin. For the Amerristique people of today’s Nicaraguan highlands called their lands “Amerrisque,” and this name, by synecdoche, was probably used to refer to all of the hemisphere by the Spaniards who first landed in Nicaragua in 1502.
Conference Themes

The conference we propose to arrange would build on this Pacific-driven and indigenous-centered notion of our Americas. Thematically, it would chart two frames for the Pacific’s impact on the realm of ideas. The first is the Black Pacific. Despite commonplace notions, Black people have molded both sides of the Pacific rim. Following the venture of Islam, Black Africans and their descendants made their way across the Indian Ocean to the Muslim sultanates of the Malay archipelago. From there, they went north to the Philippines and the South China Sea—the world China called Nanyang: “the South Seas.” Black Southeast Asians were thus key players in the Indian Ocean trade, which connected the Swahili Coast and Rea Sea with Greater China. Then, as the Spanish and Portuguese Empires entered the Pacific, Black people of West African and Central African heritage crossed the ocean to reach the Western Pacific rim. There, they mixed with the East African-heritage Black Southeast Asians. They brought with them tales of the maroon communities their people had founded in the Americas. Indeed, in the latter continents, Black people were also key players in the Pacific world. They manned the galleons that tied the Philippines to Spanish America by crossing from Manila to Acapulco and back. They, along with indigenous Mesoamericans, were some of the key troops in the Spanish conquest of the Philippines, and thus were crucial to building the Viceroyalty of New Spain, a realm centered in Mexico City that stretched across most of North America and the North Pacific, to include the Philippines. As more Black communities achieved a semi-autonomous status in Spanish America, through claiming their own liberty, they kept up these trans-Pacific contacts. Indeed, some of the hotbeds of Maoist thought and practice in the Americas in the 1960s and 1970s were Afro-Colombian, Afro-Ecuadorian, and Afro-Mexican towns. For these communities felt they were getting a bad deal both from the liberal regimes running their states, and from the Che Guevara-style politics that then prevailed among the region’s Marxist groups. The Chinese government realized this. Hence it did everything it could to support these connections between the Africana-Americas and the Sinosphere.

Our other theme is Spanish America’s hand in the Pacific. From the 16th until the 19th century, the Spanish empire dominated the eastern and central parts of that ocean. And the empire’s trade with China and Nanyang through its foothold in the Philippines, Guam, and the Mariana Islands made it a key player in the western Pacific, too. For its part, China was influenced by the vast new market for its goods in Spanish America. To serve that market and move the trade, Chinese people quickly migrated to the Spanish East Indies, Acapulco, and Mexico City. Since that point onward, people of Chinese heritage have been key factors in Spanish American society. Moreover, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Spanish East Indies remained parts of the Spanish empire until 1898. So the political ties between Spanish America and the western Pacific were longstanding. They ended only comparatively recently.

Conference Questions, Participants, Venue

We propose to convene members of the Engaged Political Theory Working Group and the Seminar for Latin American Philosophy in a single conference, which would explore the following questions about these themes:

- How does appreciating Black people’s—and especially Black Americans’—role in the history of the Western, Central, and Eastern Pacific change widespread and North Atlantic-dominated notions of the Black experience?
- Consider the trans-Pacific interchanges among Black communities, including of ideas and models of freedom, rights, and marronage across the Pacific. How do these remold our notions of Black freedom and Black autonomy?
- Do these interchanges mean that key discourses in the Spanish empire, over human rights and republicanism, should be seen as languages of Black and marron communities?
- What can we learn about liberalism as a global political theory by studying liberal ideas in 19th and early 20th century Mexico side by side with liberal ideas in the Philippines in the same period?
- What can we learn about laicism and secularism as global political theories by studying the laicist and secularist drives of the Philippine Revolution and the Mexican Revolution?

We would hold the conference at the Institute for Philosophical Research at UNAM in Mexico City in October 2024. Some of the presenters would gather in-person at the Institute, while others will Zoom in from the United States and elsewhere. We think the Mexico City location apt, since that city was the center of Spanish America. And it was the linchpin of Spanish American enterprises in the Pacific. Finally, as we have said, Black Spanish Americans were central figures in those endeavors.

**Project Impact**

The project will benefit American philosophy by democratizing it, and by opening it to voices and ideas it has long had trouble hearing. American philosophy has long been centered on North Atlantic voices and ideas. It has long sidelined ideas and viewpoints from the rest of our Americas. This project would center those ideas and viewpoints. It would probe what can be learned by treating them as equal intellectual partners. That can be seen in the questions which our conference will put, which we repeat here:

- How does appreciating Black people’s—and especially Black Americans’—role in the history of the Western, Central, and Eastern Pacific change widespread and North Atlantic-dominated notions of the Black experience?
- Consider the trans-Pacific interchanges among Black communities, including of ideas and models of freedom, rights, and marronage across the Pacific. How do these remold our notions of Black freedom and Black autonomy?
- Do these interchanges mean that key discourses in the Spanish empire, over human rights and republicanism, should be seen as languages of Black and marron communities?
- What can we learn about liberalism as a global political theory by studying liberal ideas in 19th and early 20th century Mexico side by side with liberal ideas in the Philippines in the same period?
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**Project Goals**

- Engaged political theory aims to expand political theory's global reach, by partnering with ideas, voices, and movements that have been most affected by injustices.
- Our proposed conference would center on and spotlight such voices, from across the Americas.
- Engaged political theory seeks to foster the use of engaged approaches to theorizing. Among these are delving into archives compiled by the downtrodden, community-driven fieldwork, participatory action research, ethnography, structured interviews, public philosophy, and movement-requested thinking.
Our conference would study in such archives and use such public techniques. It responds to Black Lives Matter's demand to take seriously Black ideas and agency. And also Hispanophone demands to refuse continued Anglophone hegemony in the Americas.

Engaged political theory aims re-center "marginal" ideas and practices within political theory. By using its methods to address problems that elite academe long thought distinct to those most affected by injustices.

Our conference would probe how seeing

**Project Timeline**

Spring 2024: Receive funds from APA.

January 2024: Send invitations to Working Group and Seminar members to present at conference

March 2024: Finalize conference personnel

August 2024: Finalize Mexico City lodgings for visiting presenters

September 2024: Publicize event to Mexico City philosophical community (large)

October 2024: Hold conference at UNAM's Philosophy Institute

November 2024: Project co-leads write conference assessment.

**Project Outreach**

Our main audience is the philosophical community in Mexico City. More broadly, it is the political philosophy communities in Spanish American universities. We plan to put out advertising to the Mexico City community through word of mouth, association listservs, and social media. And the same to the political philosophy community in Spanish America.

Several of our members come from Minority-serving Institutions in the United States and Canada. So we plan to send targeted social media notices inviting other colleagues who do political philosophy at those universities to consider attending so that they can decide whether the project is worth joining.

**Accessibility Plan**

The conference will be live-streamed through Zoom and projected on large screens. Zoom’s transcript service will be turned on for the hearing-impaired.

There is no extra cost for this service.

Tom Donahue-Ochoa and Juan Espíndola will serve as point persons on accessibility.

"To request accessibility accommodations, contact Tom Donahue-Ochoa or Juan Espíndola, at tjdonahue@haverford.edu."

Haverford Office of Access and Disability Services; UNAM Unidad de Atención para Personas con Descapacidad
Evaluation Plan
We will advertise the event broadly to the philosophical community in Mexico City (which is large). At the last event of the conference, we will distribute a questionnaire to all attendees and presenters asking what they learned, how the event may have changed the view of the questions at issue, what they think worked and what didn’t. We will use the findings to assess the event’s achievements, and how it contributed to our larger project in Engaged Political Theory for Our Americas. The project coordinators will meet two weeks after the conference to write the assessment and submit it to the APA.

Online Presence
The conference overview and abstracts will be published on the Reconnecting Theory website, URL below. Advertisements and flyers will go out on social media (Mastodon, etc.)

https://reconnectingtheory.org

Budget Narrative
We project a total outlay of 4800 USD for the conference. Of that, we will seek 1800 USD from other sources, both from funds already secured, and from other grants we are applying for. We are seeking 3000 USD from the APA’s Small Grants Fund. The projected budget breaks down to:

-Honoraria for presenters (8 presenters x 350 USD): 2800 USD (1800 from APA)

-Lodging for visiting presenters (4 visiting presenters x 200 USD): 800 USD (400 from APA)

-Dinner for in-person presenters & commentators (8 guests x 150 USD): 1200 USD (800 from APA)

Other Funding Sources
14K USD already won from Haverford and sister colleges of Bryn Mawr and Swarthmore (maintained by Hurford Center for the Humanities and other Haverford College offices). Of that, 500 USD would be used to support this event.

10K USD applied for from American Political Science Association. Of that, 1300 USD would be used to support this event. We should hear back about the grant application in September 2023.
### American Philosophical Association Small Grant Budget Template

**Project Title:** Political Theory for Our Americas: Philosophizing the Black and Spanish Pacific

**Project Coordinator(s):** Tom Donahue-Ochoa

**Total Funding Request:** 3,000 USD

Proposals over $5,000 normally are not funded.

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<tr>
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**Total**  $4,800.00  $1,800.00  $3,000.00

Cells in the total row automatically total the items in the column above them.

The total cell for the last column must match the total in the top section of the budget template. If the total here does not match the corresponding total above,
CURRICULUM VITAE

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Current collaborative project: https://reconnectingtheory.org
Research: https://www.haverford.edu/users/tjdonahue

EMPLOYMENT

Assistant Professor, Haverford College, Political Science et al. 2023—
Visiting Asst Professor, Haverford College, Political Science et al. 2014-2023
Lecturer, Yale University, Ethics, Politics & Economics and Political Science 2010-2014
Postdoctoral Research Fellow, UNAM, Philosophy Institute 2009-2010
Lecturer, Yale University, Ethics, Politics & Economics and Political Science 2008-2009

EDUCATION

Ph.D., Johns Hopkins University, Political Theory May 2008
M.A., University of Chicago, International Relations Aug 2002
A.B., Colby College, History, magna cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa May 2000

BOOK

Thomas J. Donahue-Ochoa, Unfreedom for All: How the World’s Injustices Harm You (Oxford University Press, 2019)

ARTICLES

Thomas J. Donahue, “Terrorism and the Types of Wrongdoing,” Public Affairs Quarterly 24, 3 (July 2010).

WORK IN PROGRESS

Book manuscript on democratizing knowledge
“Beyond Decolonial and Subject Knowledges: How Seeing the Noted as Cases of the Neglected Also Centers the Margins”
“Challenging Epistemic Injustice: United Front or Public Pluralism?”
“Missing the Turn: Transnationalism in North Atlantic Political Theory”
“Are the Privileged Normal?”

SYMPOSIUM ON MY RESEARCH

RECENT INVITED TALKS

RECENT GRANTS RECEIVED
$275K Seeding Grant, Stevens Initiative (Co-planner), March 2022
$22.2K President’s Ethical Leadership Initiative (Co-PI, Diverted for COVID), March 2020
$14.5K Bi-Co Global Learning Projects Grant, Bi-Co Provosts (Sub-awardee), May 2022
$10K Interdependence grant, Haverford Provost’s Office (PI), March 2020
$5K + student worker Social Inquiry grant, Haverford Provost’s Office (Co-PI), May 2021
$3K Course Grant, Haverford Diversity and Inclusion Initiative (PI), April 2019
$2K Faculty Working Group Grant, Haverford Hurford Center (PI), Sept 2022

RECENT PROFESSIONAL SERVICE
Co-founder and lead organizer, Reconnecting Theory: The Margins as Centers.
Referee of book manuscripts for Oxford UP and Stanford UP, articles for many journals.

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS
International Political Science Assn. American Historical Assn. (Associate Mem.)
American Political Science Assn. Assn. for Political Theory
American Philosophical Assn. Philosophy, Politics, and Economics Society

LANGUAGES
English (native); Spanish (fluent reading and speaking, basic writing); French (fluent reading)

REFERENCES
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Andrew Valls, Oregon State Dept of Political Science; andrew.valls@oregonstate.edu
Faviola Rivera, UNAM Philosophy Institute; faviolarivera@gmail.com
Richard Flathman, JHU Dept of Political Science; (deceased; letter available on request)
Sean Greenberg, UC-Irvine Dept of Philosophy; greenbes@uci.edu