

“Decolonizing Political Theory”: Exploring the Implications of Advocacy for Political Science

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On June 13, 2012, the Political Theory section of the Canadian Political Science Association (CPSA) conference held a Centennial Panel on “Political Theory, Empirical Political Analysis and The Evolution of Political Science”.¹ The abstract for the session noted that while “political theorists have teamed up with empirical analysts to engage in serious assessments of their assumptions and the questions they each ask”, many political theorists have been uncomfortable with these developments. Some political theorists have been questioning political theory’s combination with empirical political analysis because “interpretivists seek to combine theory with empirical work in different ways”. Other political theorists, because of their relativist assumptions, “remain deeply sceptical about the idea of base line facts about the state, the nature of human beings, and the very existence of categories like race, gender and culture by which people are managed politically”.

One of the most thought provoking presentations on this panel was given by Andrew Rehfeld, who argued, drawing on his article “Offensive Political Theory”, that much of what constitutes political theory does not belong in the discipline of political science. Of particular significance was his assertion that advocacy did not constitute political theory, as envisioned in political science, because it was not seeking knowledge about the political world.

Rehfeld’s presentation, however, stands in sharp contrast to a prominent initiative in political theory – attempts to “decolonize” the subfield. A number of workshops and panels at the 2012 CPSA conference were “seeking to critically examine the colonial impulses and decolonizing potential of political theory”.² It was assumed that western political thought has “served, either implicitly or explicitly, to justify the dispossession of indigenous and/or other non-European peoples’ lands and self-determining authority...”, but that “colonized peoples and their allies [have] been able to selectively appropriate and critically transform these theoretical frameworks to support their own discourses and struggles over land and freedom...”.

These opposing notions of political theory raise important questions about the role of the subfield in the discipline of political science, and how it should respond to contradictions between evidence based conceptions of politics and government and decolonization initiatives that

¹ <http://www.cpsa-acsp.ca/pdfs/2012programme.pdf>, p. 85 [accessed May 2013].

² <http://www.cpsa-acsp.ca/pdfs/2012programme.pdf>, p. 48 [accessed May 2013].

encourage political theorists to become “allies” and unconditionally support the “discourses” of colonized peoples. In order to examine this further, Rehfeld’s conception of political theory will be summarized, and contrasted with the arguments maintaining the political theory should be decolonized. While Rehfeld would likely maintain that attempts to decolonize political theory do not belong in political science, this paper will show that his analysis does not go far enough in grappling with what is essentially the intrusion of advocacy into political science. This paper will take Rehfeld’s analysis further; it will explore how advocacy constrains our capacity to conduct research in political science, especially when it pertains to indigenous politics and government and aboriginal-settler relations.

The Role of Political Theory in Political Science

In his article “Offensive Political Theory”, Andrew Rehfeld examines what political theory is, and how it fits within the discipline of political science.³ He notes that this question has raised considerable controversy in the discipline, with some political scientists concluding that political theory should be eliminated from their programs.

In response to this controversy, Rehfeld makes the argument that political theory *does* belong because it is an aspect of political science. His view is based on the assumption that, because political science is a social science, it must aspire to “come to *know* things about the social world as it actually is...”.⁴ For Rehfeld,

the consequences of removing *all* political theory from political science... would be a loss to political science on its own terms, for it would hamper a complete scientific understanding of politics, just as the absence of theory from economics and psychology has been a loss for those disciplines... We would know more about economic activity if we understood more about value, benefit, and exchange, but that work, being essentially theoretical and hence no longer performed in departments of economics, has been relegated largely to philosophy departments. Economists who nevertheless continue to speak of ‘utility’ but who cannot cash it out, as it were, except by some appeal to monetary currency are making a conceptual error that limits their understanding of a very real social phenomenon.⁵

A scientific understanding of politics, according to Rehfeld, would pertain to “research that takes political phenomena as its object of study, using a method that does not violate the assumptions of science”. This includes, in Rehfeld’s view, “an activity (‘research’), an objective of study (‘political phenomena’), and a method (‘the assumptions of science’).”⁶

Although the idea of “research” is perceived as being uncontroversial, and therefore is not discussed by Rehfeld, “political phenomena” and “the assumptions of science” are elaborated upon. With respect to “political phenomena”, Rehfeld maintains that this “must involve the use, or potential use, of power over people”, and “excludes... the study of states of consciousness and

³ Andrew Rehfeld, “Offensive Political Theory”, *Perspectives on Politics*, 18(2), June 2010, pp. 465-486.

⁴ Rehfeld, “Offensive Political Theory”, p. 472 (emphasis in the original).

⁵ Rehfeld, “Offensive Political Theory”, p. 467.

⁶ Rehfeld, “Offensive Political Theory”, p. 471.

solitary acts done in private *in and of themselves*".⁷ The "assumptions of science" referred to by Rehfeld involves two features – "an observer-independent world" and "falsifiability". The requirement of an observer-independent world assumes "that there are facts about a world 'out there' to be discovered", and scientific research is perceived as being "an enterprise to systematically discover these facts...".⁸ The criterion of falsifiability, on the other hand, demands that a claim can be refuted with "contradictory evidence gained from reason or experience". This means that researchers "can specify what would demonstrate that the claim was wrong".⁹

In his investigation into what types of research belong in political science, Rehfeld maintains that there are six types of political theory.¹⁰ These include the following:

- Conceptual - "research about political concepts";
- Normative - "research about the norms we ought to endorse about the use of power, and/or the way that power and resources ought to be distributed based on those norms";
- Explanatory - "research that offers causal accounts of political events";
- Interpretive - "research that makes claims about the meaning of political events to those who participated in them, and/or that offers the researcher's interpretation of those events";
- Textual and historical - "research that traces the development of an idea through time, and/or that offers an interpretation of what an author meant in writing what he did"; and
- Advocacy - "research that promotes social and political change".

After categorizing political theory thusly, Rehfeld asserts that much of the research in these areas would be excluded from the discipline. More specifically, he maintains that some normative and conceptual political theory would be excluded, most explanatory and interpretive political theory, and almost all textual and historical political theory. Advocacy, also a major area of political theory, would be completely excluded.

Rehfeld's arguments about what should be included and excluded in political science are largely based upon his understanding of the differences in methods between the social sciences and humanities. According to Rehfeld, "methodologically and culturally, the presumption of falsification marks a rough and ready distinction between the humanities and sciences with regard to the kinds of errors their practitioners are willing to make". He goes on to state that the process of testing leads science to resist original claims. This is in contrast to the humanities, which "are primarily concerned with creative expressions and interpretations that construct an appreciation for the distinctively human features of our world". According to Rehfeld, "the humanities often seek evidence to support an argument, and emphasize its coherence and persuasiveness, rather than trying to falsify it, or articulating what the conditions of coherence or

⁷ Rehfeld, "Offensive Political Theory", pp. 472-473 (emphasis in the original).

⁸ Rehfeld, "Offensive Political Theory", p. 474. Rehfeld maintains that these are "assumptions of science and not ontological assertions. Whether or not they are true, in order to do science, one must assume that they are". Rehfeld, "Offensive Political Theory", p. 472.

⁹ This is not empirical positivism, according to Rehfeld, which limits how we go about gaining that knowledge to empirical means alone. It also extends to logic and the structure of arguments. Rehfeld, "Offensive Political Theory", p. 474.

¹⁰ For a full discussion of the different types of political theory see Rehfeld, "Offensive Political Theory", pp. 475-478.

persuasiveness are or should be". This methodological difference, in Rehfeld's view, "corresponds to whether a person would, at the margins, prefer to avoid believing false claims, or prefer to believe true ones".¹¹

Rehfeld's criteria for determining what kinds of political theory "fit" in political science, however, has been criticized for being too narrow. Ross J. Corbett, for example, argues that political science "must be defined by its subject matter alone, and that political theory's contribution to this subject matter must be defended".¹² He is critical of Rehfeld's contention that political science must be scientific, and instead argues for a broader conception of research. Corbett's criticism is consistent with the arguments of other political scientists who have warned against the "wave of scientism" that has influenced the discipline.¹³ The humanistic strand of political theory should remain in political science, these theorists argue, because "politics is too important to be left...to... 'method-driven' inquiry in which the tools available dictate the questions to be asked of political matters".¹⁴

These arguments of Rehfeld, and the critical responses to them, raise questions about the role that advocacy should play in political theory, and by extension political science. Although in disagreement on a number of points, all commentators note that political science is about research and/or scholarship regarding politics, whether scientific or humanistic. Both humanistic and scientific methods are promoted on the basis that they can "assist in giving form to emergent realities that otherwise remain beyond our ken".¹⁵ If this is the case, how does advocacy fit within these parameters?

Advocacy, in Rehfeld's view, can never be included in political theory because it does not attempt to obtain knowledge about the political world. Rehfeld maintains that advocacy is about changing the world, not understanding it. As Rehfeld explains, "advocacy...is concerned with *using* power, and advocacy research is primarily concerned with effecting change, rather than seeking to know things about the world as such".¹⁶ Rehfeld, therefore, disagrees with Sanford E. Schram, who maintains that advocacy enables political science to develop "more robust forms of knowledge".¹⁷ Rehfeld points out that

science as a distinct and worthwhile enterprise is and ought to be primarily concerned with the acquisition of knowledge, not the promotion of change or preservation. There may be a close relationship between advocacy and normative research: advocates might rely on normative research to guide how they change the world, to issue calls to action, and promote activity to change entrenched and unjustified political structures; normative

¹¹ Rehfeld, "Offensive Political Theory", p. 474.

¹² Ross J. Corbett, "Political Theory within Political Science", *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 44(3), July 2011, p. 565.

¹³ Robert Adcock, "Interpreting Behaviouralism", pp. 181, 190 cited in Timothy V. Kaufman-Osborn, "Political Theory as Profession and as Subfield?", *Political Research Quarterly*, 63(3), 2010, p. 660.

¹⁴ Ian Shapiro, "Problems, methods, and theories in the study of politics, or what's wrong with political science and what to do about it", *Political Theory*, 30, 2002, p. 588, cited in Kaufman-Osborn, "Political Theory as Profession and as Subfield?", p. 667.

¹⁵ Kaufman-Osborn, "Political Theory as Profession and as Subfield?", p. 669.

¹⁶ Rehfeld, "Offensive Political Theory", p. 476.

¹⁷ Sanford F. Schram, "Return to Politics", cited in Rehfeld, "Offensive Political Theory", p. 476.

theorists may also be motivated by a real desire to promote, say, justice and social change, but their work is dedicated to knowledge of what to do, not the actual doing.¹⁸

According to Rehfeld, it is important to recognize that “the acquisition of knowledge is different than the use one makes of it”, and advocacy concerns the latter and not the former. He is quick to point out, however, that this does not mean that social and political problems should have no bearing on what goes on within political science. The identification of important political questions is an aspect of what he calls the “agenda setting function” in political science – an endeavour he distinguishes from advocacy.¹⁹

Rehfeld is not alone in his rejection of the incorporation of advocacy into political science. Corbett, for example, notes that while he has “intentionally avoided the question of whether political theory can produce knowledge, even granting that much that is of political concern is not amendable to empirical analysis”, political science should be “rigorous”, and “the activity of political scientists should be research rather than mere self-expression or popular-press editorializing”.²⁰ Gunnell also maintains that “there is...one basic criterion in terms of which to evaluate what is labeled ‘political theory.’ This is the quality of its scholarship”.²¹

All these discussions of whether or not political theory should use humanistic or scientific methods, therefore, tend to obscure a more important distinction in political science – that is, research that is based on evidence versus work that is undertaken for the purpose of advocacy. Advocacy, in fact, cannot even be considered to be “research”. Its intent is not “the systematic study of materials and sources in order to establish facts and reach new conclusions”.²² It begins with a conclusion, and selects information according to whether it supports its political purposes. Advocacy is defined as “pleading in support of” a case or cause. Enabling this enterprise to intrude into the discipline of political science will undermine both the scientific *and* humanistic elements of political theory.

The Case of “Decolonizing Political Theory”

The above examination of the arguments surrounding how political theory “fits” within political science raises questions about how the case of “decolonizing political theory” should be conceptualized in the discipline. What kind of political theory does it represent? How does this kind of political theory systematically study “the use, or potential use, of power over people”?

In examining the literature on the initiative of decolonizing political theory, one of its main concerns is facilitating self rule for indigenous peoples.²³ Mainstream, or “western”,²⁴ political

¹⁸ Rehfeld, “Offensive Political Theory”, pp.476-7.

¹⁹ Rehfeld, “Offensive Political Theory”, p. 476.

²⁰ Corbett, “Political Theory within Political Science”, p. 565.

²¹ John G. Gunnell, “Professing Political Theory”, p. 677.

²² “Research”, *Compact Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 969

²³ Margaret Kohn and Keally D. McBride, *Political Theories of Decolonization : Postcolonialism and the Problem of Foundations* (Cary, NC, USA: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 16.

²⁴ Ivison, Patton and Sanders define “western political thought” as “that body of political, legal and social theory developed by European, American, Australian and New Zealand authors and practitioners from the beginning of the modern period in Europe to the present”. Duncan Ivison, Paul Patton and Will Sanders, “Introduction”, in Ivison, Patton and Sanders (eds), *Political Theory and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 2.

theory is perceived to be largely “colonial” in its character, acting to justify the oppression of non-western peoples. Although political theory is “concerned with the normative problem of the justification of government as well as the question of how, in fact, peoples or populations are governed”,²⁵ it is believed to legitimize colonization by absorbing “the reigning ideology of the superiority of European-derived societies”²⁶ and accepting “colonial expansion and imperial control over indigenous peoples and their territories”.²⁷ According to James Tully, political theory is often aligned with colonization “by justifying, defending, or serving as the language of governance and administration of the system and its conflicts” and “[playing]...the (sometimes unintended) role of a discursive technique of government in...strategies of extinguishment and accommodation”. As a result, he asserts that “with a few notable exceptions, western political theory has played the role of legitimation in the past and continues to do so today”.²⁸

The process of decolonization has been defined by Joyce Green as “the inclusion of colonized peoples in institutions of power, the design of which in politically significant ways reflects the priorities and cultural assumptions of the colonized as well as those of the colonizer”²⁹ – a circumstance that “occurs when the subordinated peoples successfully contest the conditions of their oppression”.³⁰ Decolonizing political theory, therefore, involves philosophizing about politics and government in an attempt to bring about these circumstances. It explores “the challenges of founding a new polity that is more just”, including the achievement of political freedom for those who have been colonized. These ruminations are connected to a number of other developments in the academy - postcolonial theory, critical race theory, and “the politics of identity and entitlement”.³¹

Efforts to decolonize political theory, therefore, have generally focused on two general themes – 1) unmasking the oppressive assumptions in western political theory that are perceived to have historically justified colonization and empire building;³² and 2) proposing new ways of thinking about politics that could potentially facilitate indigenous self-determination.³³ A major influence on the first theme has been critical race theory. It is argued that “political theory needs to be ‘raced’, that is, unpacked and contextualized in ways which make visible and the racialized interests present within concepts of the ‘good life’ or ‘good community’”.³⁴

One of the main assumptions in political theory that has been perceived to have historically aided colonization, strangely, is the enlightenment notion of universality. It is maintained that “the

²⁵ Ivison et al., “Introduction”, p. 2.

²⁶ James Tully, “The Struggles of Indigenous Peoples for and of Freedom”, in Ivison et al (eds), *Political Theory and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, p. 43.

²⁷ Ivison et al., “Introduction”, p.2. See also Kohn and McBride, *Political Theories of Decolonization*, p. 24.

²⁸ Tully, “The Struggles of Indigenous Peoples for and of Freedom”, p.43.

²⁹ Joyce Green, “Decolonization and Recolonization in Canada”, in Wallace Clement and Leah Vosko (eds), *Changing Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003), pp. 54-55.

³⁰ Green, “Decolonization and Recolonization in Canada”, pp. 68-69.

³¹ For a discussion of the “politics of identity and entitlement” see Terrence Ball, Richard Dagger, William Christian, and Colin Campbell, *Political Ideologies and the Democratic Ideal, Third Canadian Edition* (Toronto: Pearson, 2013), pp. 221-246.

³² www.cpsa-acsp.ca/pdfs/Programme2012.doc [accessed May 2013].

³³ Ivison et al., “Introduction”, p. 5.

³⁴ Elizabeth Philipose, “Decolonizing Political Theory”, *Radical Pedagogy*, 2007, http://www.radicalpedagogy.org/Radical_Pedagogy/Decolonizing_Political_Theory.html (accessed May 2013).

production of whiteness, ultimately, is inseparable from the production of a notion of humanity and its related concepts of freedom, autonomy, equality, progress, rationality and individuality”.³⁵ This has occurred, in part, it is argued, because the concepts in political theory have been formulated by theorists who participated in slavery and the oppression of indigenous peoples. It is pointed out that “as much as modern political theory, especially in its liberal and social democratic variants, has emphasized universal human rights, equality before the law and individual and collective freedom, it has also explicitly denied such entitlements to indigenous peoples”.³⁶ Jean Jacques Rousseau, for example, is criticized by Mary Hawkesworth on the basis that “he championed liberty and equality as the only criteria for a legitimate polity, as...he supported a ‘racialized regime of visual signification’ compatible with colonization”.³⁷ Rousseau, according to Hawkesworth, “grounded the right of democratic participation on a principle of resemblance, an embodied likeness that presupposed preserving mastery over land, household, and raced-gendered others, whose lesser humanity was a product of the imagined community that Rousseau’s theory called into being”.³⁸ As a result of these arguments, Hawkesworth maintains that Rousseau “condemned the ‘lesser races...’ to perpetual servitude”.

In addition to its being the product of theorists who are claimed to have accepted oppressive political processes in their own lives, political theory is also seen as an agent of colonization because it is considered to be “colonial knowledge”. Political theory, because it “accompanied the period of modern European colonialism and the European experience of colonial administration, imperial rivalries and nation-building, abroad and at home”, often absorbed principles that justified colonization because of the climate of the times. It is maintained that the relationship between the self and other “resonates throughout European philosophy”, enabling the ideas expressed in western political thought to be used as the basis for carrying out expropriation and domination.

With respect to liberal political theory, in particular, the assumption that is perceived to have most directly influenced colonialism is individualism. It is argued that, in liberal political theory,

citizenship remains rooted in the espousal of universal individual rights rather than in recognition of indigeneity as a pre-existing right. Entitlement patterns are defined on the basis of formal equality before the law, in effect confirming liberal values that what we have in common is more important than what divides us, that what we accomplish as individuals is more significant as a basis for reward or evaluation than membership in a particular group, and that the content of our character rather than the colour of skin should serve as the basis for judgement.³⁹

Much of liberal political theory is “perceived to be fundamentally hostile to [indigenous peoples’] claims” because it reduces the distinctive rights indigenous groups possess as peoples “to undifferentiated rights of citizens participating in the processes of collective will formation as

³⁵ Philipose, “Decolonizing Political Theory”.

³⁶ Ivison et al., “Introduction”, p. 2.

³⁷ Mary Hawkesworth, “From Constitutive Outside to the Politics of Extinction: Critical Race Theory, Feminist Theory, and Political Theory”, *Political Research Quarterly*, 63(3), 2010, p. 690.

³⁸ Hawkesworth, “From Constitutive Outside to the Politics of Extinction”, p. 690.

³⁹ Roger Maaka and Augie Fleras, “Engaging with Indigeneity: Tino Rangatiratanga in Aotearoa”, in Ivison et al (eds), *Political Theory and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, p. 107.

part of an already constituted ‘people’”. Liberal conceptualizations of politics and government, therefore, “[presuppose] precisely what is at issue: the nature of ‘the people’ upon whom rests the legitimacy of democratic authority...”⁴⁰

The notion of the individual in liberal political theory, according to some who call for its decolonization, is a man who is “propertied, heterosexual, of appropriate lineage, well mannered and in control of his emotions and passions”. It is a conception of “Whiteness” that has a “sensibility about moderation, self-control and reason”. It is noted that this conception of man is criticized by theorists of decolonization such as Frantz Fanon, who maintains that blacks are more emotional than whites. According to Fanon, “emotion is completely Negro as reason is Greek”.⁴¹ Decolonizing political theory, therefore, aims to “interrogate precepts of liberal individualism and investigate its foundational role in normalizing racial... dynamics and racist... exclusions”.⁴²

Liberal notions of universality are also perceived to be colonialist because they are tied to assumptions about political development and historical progress in the works of political theorists. It is pointed out that John Stuart Mill, for example, had a “deeply problematic theory of civilizational advance” that was based on “his conviction that the Roman Empire brought civilization to the barbaric British Isles”. Mill’s view that “the introduction of the rule of law brought civilization and therefore the possibility of self-government to the colonies” is also criticized on the basis that it justified colonization.⁴³

Although decolonizing political theory’s target is mainly liberalism, its opposition to notions of historical progress also leads to a criticism of Marxist political theory. It is noted that while “Marxism provided a language for describing economic inequality and understanding the struggle against it”, its value is “limited by its developmental theory of historical progress and the erasure of race/culture”.⁴⁴ It is pointed out that, according to Marx, “stagnation and despotism in Africa and Asia justify colonization as a means of ‘civilization...’”.⁴⁵ The Marxist notion of progress as resulting from the tendency of productive forces to develop by increasing human control over nature is perceived by proponents of decolonization as a “shared myth of liberalism and socialism”.⁴⁶

In contrast to what is perceived to be the oppressive aspects of western political theory, decolonization initiatives maintain that new forms of political theory should be developed that enable theorists to become allies of the colonized. These are elements of the subfield that “delegitimize the system in one way or another” and use “a discursive technique in the practice of resistance”.⁴⁷ They are concerned with “the very survival of indigenous peoples”⁴⁸ and ask “how... contemporary political theory [can] contribute to a future in which indigenous communities no longer suffer the consequences of colonization, dispossession and forced

⁴⁰ Ivison et al., “Introduction”, pp. 6-7.

⁴¹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Grove Press, 1987), p. 127, in Philipose, “Decolonizing Political Theory”.

⁴² Hawkesworth, “From Constitutive Outside to the Politics of Extinction”, pp. 690-691.

⁴³ Kohn and McBride, *Political Theories of Decolonization*, p. 16.

⁴⁴ Kohn and McBride, *Political Theories of Decolonization*, p. 20.

⁴⁵ Hawkesworth, “From Constitutive Outside to the Politics of Extinction”, p. 690.

⁴⁶ Joyce Green, “Decolonization and Recolonization in Canada”, p. 55.

⁴⁷ Tully, “The Struggle of Indigenous Peoples for and of Freedom”, p.43.

⁴⁸ Ivison et al., “Introduction”, p. 1.

assimilation...”.⁴⁹ They consider alternatives to the civilizing mission of colonial powers and examine how counterhegemonic ideas have been institutionalized. There is also the study of postcolonial state formation and the radical reconfiguration of “the ideals of law, universality, and citizenship in ways that continue to shape regimes after they have attained independence”.⁵⁰ This is aided by a “theoretical exploration of the texts of decolonization and postcolonialism”, as well as the “intellectual history of the movements that fought for political independence from colonial power”.⁵¹ Core concepts in political theory are looked at “with an eye to the fundamental issue of justice for colonised indigenous peoples”.⁵² This, according to those promoting the decolonization of the subfield, will deepen political theorists’ understanding of these concepts.⁵³

In Canadian political theory, resistance to colonialism is often examined with the “lens of multiculturalism and recognition politics”.⁵⁴ The inherent right to self-government is recognized, and questions about its appropriate implementation are explored.⁵⁵ The inherent sovereignty of aboriginal peoples is often proclaimed, as well as increasing the capacity of indigenous peoples to make space within the state-based political system.⁵⁶ Political theory, to become decolonized, necessitates “recognizing and responding to indigenous claims” and making political theory intercultural.⁵⁷

In opposition to the universalist character of the assumptions of western political theory, those arguing for the decolonization of the subfield maintain that the perspectives of the colonized should be incorporated,⁵⁸ including “indigenous political theory”. It is argued that “the academic canon must be transformed by the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives, knowledge, and respect for contemporary Aboriginal citizens, communities, workers, and neighbours”.⁵⁹ The history of colonization needs to be confronted, and it “must be understood from the perspective of those who were most disadvantaged”.⁶⁰

Demands that the perspectives of the colonized be incorporated into political theory are related to the influence of postmodernism⁶¹ on the subfield. Postmodernism, already a significant force in

⁴⁹ Ivison et al., “Introduction”, p. 1.

⁵⁰ Kohn and McBride, *Political Theories of Decolonization*, p. 17.

⁵¹ Kohn and McBride, *Political Theories of Decolonization*, pp.19- 20.

⁵² Ivison et al., “Introduction”.

⁵³ Kohn and McBride, *Political Theories of Decolonization*, pp. 14, 18.

⁵⁴ www.cpsa-acsp.ca/pdfs/Programme2012.doc [accessed May 2013].

⁵⁵ Will Kymlicka, “American Multiculturalism and the ‘Nations Within’”, in Ivison et al.

⁵⁶ Tully, “The Struggle of Indigenous Peoples for and of Freedom”, p. 42.

⁵⁷ Ivison et al., “Introduction”, pp. 1, 5.

⁵⁸ Kiera Ladner, cited in Frances Widdowson, “Native Studies and Political Science: The Implications of ‘Decolonizing the Discipline’”, in Frances Widdowson and Albert Howard (eds), *Approaches to Aboriginal Education in Canada: Searching for Solutions* (Edmonton: Brush Education, forthcoming). See also Glen S. Coulthard, “Subjects of Empire: Indigenous Peoples and the ‘Politics of Recognition’ in Canada”, *Contemporary Political Theory* 6, 2007, p. 447.

⁵⁹ Green, “Decolonization and Recolonization”, p. 55.

⁶⁰ Green, “Decolonization and Recolonization”, p. 71.

⁶¹ Postmodernism is defined by Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont as “an intellectual current characterized by the more-or-less explicit rejection of the rationalist tradition of the Enlightenment, by theoretical discourses disconnected from any empirical test, and by a cognitive and cultural relativism that regards science as nothing more than a

the academy more generally, argues that it is impossible to discover facts about the world.⁶² It is connected to critical race theory, which maintains that the “interlocking myths of universality and neutrality that undergird theorizing without attention to physical and temporal specificity enable, rationalize, and sustain exclusions grounded in race...”.⁶³ Therefore, decolonizing political theory is perceived to “[pose] significant challenges to the epistemic assumptions of traditional approaches to political theory”.⁶⁴ It has “contested androcentric, Eurocentric, and colonial ‘ways to truth’ that universalize the experiences of a fraction of the human population” so as to challenge colonial rule.⁶⁵ Indigenous methodologies have an “urgency imperative” that attempts to “fundamentally transform the institutional and epistemic conditions of life and thought for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people...”.⁶⁶ It is asserted that scholars should be “warriors” so that aboriginal perspectives and traditions can be honoured and incorporated into the academy.⁶⁷

The influence of postmodern relativism and critical race theory on decolonizing political theory initiatives raise questions about how they fit within political science. What does it mean for political theory when attempts are made to decolonize it? As will be shown below, what results are theories and methodologies that are anti-scientific and anti-humanistic. This is because much of decolonizing political theory is concerned with advocacy, which is contrary to the requirements of an academic discipline like political science.

Decolonizing Political Theory’s Position in Political Science

Earlier in this paper, the difference between scientific and humanistic methods, as well as the oppositional character of research and advocacy, was discussed. These distinctions reveal that decolonizing political theory has a number of strands, some of which could fit within the discipline of political science. Decolonizing political theory would be accepted in the discipline if it was undertaking research about the political world. If it attempted to discover facts through processes of falsifiability, it would be considered scientific (and therefore accepted by Rehfeld). It could also belong in Corbett’s schema if it was “rigorous” and not just a form of “self-expression” or “popular-press editorializing”. Scientific and humanistic research conducted

‘narration’, a ‘myth’ or a social construction among many others”. *Fashionable nonsense: Postmodern intellectuals’ abuse of science* (New York: Picador USA, 1998), p. 1.

⁶² As Rehfeld points out, “since we cannot arrive at objective knowledge about a world that exists apart from our observations of it, it is said, any description of that world is a mere story we tell each other in order to impose our will on the world. It is a short step from there to the now-familiar critique of science as *merely* a hegemonic enterprise, fueled by those in power to secure their own privileged status and to oppress anyone who offers alternative ‘epistemologies’ or ‘ways of knowing’”. Rehfeld, “Offensive Political Theory”, p. 473.

⁶³ Hawkesworth, “From Constitutive Outside to the Politics of Extinction”, p. 690.

⁶⁴ Hawkesworth, “From Constitutive Outside to the Politics of Extinction”, p. 690.

⁶⁵ Hawkesworth, “From Constitutive Outside to the Politics of Extinction”, p. 691; see also, Scott Lauria Morgensen, “Destabilizing the Settler Academy: The Decolonial Effects of Indigenous Methodologies”, *American Indian Quarterly* 64(4), 2012, pp. 805-8.

⁶⁶ Morgensen, “Destabilizing the Settler Academy”, p. 805.

⁶⁷ See Taiaiake Alfred, “Warrior Scholarship: Seeing the University as a Ground of Contention”, in Devon Abbott Mihesuah and Angela Cavendar Wilson (eds), *Indigenizing the Academy: Transforming Scholarship and Empowering Communities* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), p. 95.

under the auspices of decolonizing political theory would be acceptable if it met Gunnell's criterion of high quality scholarship.

There are three aspects of decolonizing political theory that have the potential to contribute to rigorous research and high quality scholarship – conceptual analysis, normative theorizing, and the investigation of how particular ideas have influenced the development of colonization and decolonization. With respect to the first aspect – conceptual analysis – a number of terms and the ideas behind them are examined, and these concepts would be deemed by Rehfeld to be “part of the political world and the phenomena that political science, rightly conceived, ought to study”.⁶⁸ Decolonizing political theory could have the capacity, as is claimed, “to deepen how political theorists understand core concepts such as freedom, equality, sovereignty, and the rule of law”.⁶⁹ “Getting a concept right”, as Rehfeld points out, is essential to prevent political scientists from making “mistakes about our understanding of the political world”. Decolonizing political theory could aid comprehension of the “dynamics of colonization and decolonization across different contexts”, thereby contributing to our “vocabulary for analyzing contemporary politics”. As Kohn and McBride point out, “seeing the dynamics of decolonization and postcolonialism in various guises around the world provides lenses or conceptual frameworks that can complement analyses of the undeniably important role of development, security, and global justice”.⁷⁰

The normative political theory undertaken could also constitute political science, according to Rehfeld, if it consisted of “research about the norms we ought to endorse about the use of power, and/or the way that power and resources ought to be distributed based on those norms”. Decolonizing political theory also has the potential to “[explain] which institutions and practices are consistent with widely shared norms” and to try “to discover moral truth”. Some decolonizing political theory initiatives examine the nature and implications of certain norms in order to evaluate institutions and political processes. This would help political scientists to understand that “the way things are...does not necessarily correspond with the way things ought to be...”.⁷¹

An essential aspect of normative political theory, for example, concerns questions about what constitutes a just society. As was noted earlier, decolonizing political theory has involved “extended ruminations about the challenges of founding a new polity that is more just”.⁷² Incorporating investigations of indigenous politics and aboriginal-settler relations into discussions of justice, therefore, could offer some fruitful insights about the political world. It could assist, for example, in “developing and defending normative arguments for a more cosmopolitan approach to moral obligation”.⁷³

A number of strands of decolonizing political theory also attempt to understand how certain ideas have influenced colonization and decolonization. The ideas of John Locke, for example, are often examined, and these ideas could be shown to have had an impact on how power has

⁶⁸ Rehfeld, “Offensive Political Theory”, p. 476; see also p. 475 for Rehfeld's discussion of conceptual political theory.

⁶⁹ Kohn and McBride, *Political Theories of Decolonization*, p.14.

⁷⁰ Kohn and McBride, *Political Theories of Decolonization*, p. 18.

⁷¹ Rehfeld, “Offensive Political Theory”, p. 475.

⁷² Kohn and McBride, *Political Theories of Decolonization*; see also Ivison et al., “Introduction”.

⁷³ Kohn and McBride, *Political Theories of Decolonization*, p. 7.

been used over indigenous peoples. As Rehfeld explains, “interpretive theory that focuses on the social significance of events or ideas to individual actors as those actors view them is political science as here conceived, because it interprets what happened in the political world by reference to the significance and meaning of events or ideas to a set of people”.⁷⁴ He goes on to argue that we need to know if these events or ideas meant something to individuals because of their possible influence on political actors, and their subsequent use of power. Ideas can be a causal mechanism, according to Rehfeld, and this needs to be taken into account in the discipline. A researcher could show how liberal assumptions about individualism, rights, and sovereignty, as well as Marxist and liberal conceptions of progress, have shaped policies toward indigenous peoples. Depending upon the rigour of this work, it could be included in the discipline.

Some aspects of decolonizing political theory, however, constitute a researcher’s interpretation of ideas and events. Such research cannot be falsified because it constitutes the imposition of a researcher’s views on the world, not the discovery of facts about the political world “out there”. Furthermore, Rehfeld points out that “research that traces the development of an idea through time, and/or that offers an interpretation of what an author meant in writing what he did” is not political science if it cannot be directly connected to the assertion of power over people. He points out that economics as a discipline does not explore what Plato thought about property, and the field of psychology does not analyze Aristotle’s conception of the soul because these ideas do not help academics to understand these disciplines. Therefore Plato and Aristotle’s thought cannot just be examined for its own sake in political science. It needs to be shown that these ideas actually had an influence on political actors and the political world.

Much of decolonizing political theory’s contention about the colonialist character of western political thought, therefore, would not be considered political science by Rehfeld because this largely focuses on the researcher’s interpretation of what various political philosophers meant. It then assumes that this meaning has resulted in the development of various colonial processes and state policies. Studies of John Locke, for example, usually point how his ideas could be interpreted as supporting colonialism, but they do not show how his ideas were adopted by colonial officials (who then engaged in using power over indigenous peoples). This is a humanistic, not a scientific, endeavour, according to Rehfeld, as it concerns what the researcher thinks that Locke meant, not the impact that Locke’s work had on the colonization process.

It is also apparent, however, that there are a number of elements of decolonizing political theory that would not be considered either scientific or humanistic, resulting in what Hawkesworth calls “the politics of extinction” or exclusion of this work from political theory.⁷⁵ This is because the “selective appropriat[ion]” and capacity to “critically transform” western theoretical frameworks often pertains to advocacy rather than acquiring knowledge. “Alternative research practices” are promoted so as to “subvert dominant political and economic systems” and “remedy injustice”,⁷⁶ but these assertions do not relate to improving understanding; they are concerned with bringing about political change.

These strands of decolonizing political theory are consistent with Rehfeld’s definition of advocacy. Research is not done in a “mode of discovery”; it is about changing the world, not

⁷⁴ Rehfeld, “Offensive Political Theory”, p. 476.

⁷⁵ Hawkesworth, “From Constitutive Outside to the Politics of Extinction”, p. 691.

⁷⁶ Hawkesworth, “From Constitutive Outside to the Politics of Extinction”, pp. 691, 693.

increasing our understanding of colonization and decolonization. It starts with the premise of accepting the demands of some aboriginal peoples and their advisors for recognition, inherent rights, and sovereignty, and is intent on marshalling evidence in support these claims. This can be seen in two of the most significant edited volumes on political theory and indigenous peoples.⁷⁷

The advocacy character of many of the initiatives attempting to decolonize political theory leads them to promote cultural relativism – a stance that is hostile to humanistic methods. As was mentioned earlier, the humanities “are primarily concerned with creative expressions and interpretations that construct an appreciation for the distinctively human features of our world”. The notion of “humanity” assumes that there are common experiences and values that all people share. This, according to Menno Boldt, requires scholars to “transcend the boundaries of their identity to find common human ground”.⁷⁸

Decolonizing political theory initiatives, however, imply that attempts to develop universal values constitute a form of colonization, as this entails making invalid judgments about the worth of various cultures. For example, although Ivison et al. warn of “the spectre of cultural relativism”,⁷⁹ they go on to discourage any evaluation of culture. They use ironic quotation marks around the word “traditional”, maintaining that these cultures are “actually quite complex and fluid”. They also insist on characterizing notions of development as being “problematic” since it is assumed that this results in arguments about the “inherent inferiority of indigenous peoples and their practices and the inherent superiority of European norms and institutions...”.⁸⁰ No substantiation is provided to show how developmental theories are problematic or the complexity of traditional cultures.⁸¹

In addition to the problems of incorporating cultural relativism into discussions attempting to understand “the norms we ought to endorse about the use of power, and/or the way that power and resources ought to be distributed based on those norms”, the epistemological relativism of certain strands of decolonizing political theory is even more hostile to scientific and humanistic goals. It is noted that in some decolonizing political theory initiatives “the universality of political theory is questioned and subjectivity becomes the site of students’ engagement with the material and their own ways of knowing”. There is also opposition to “hegemonic traditions of knowledge”⁸² and “scientization and neoliberalization in knowledge”.⁸³ These assertions confuse knowledge with the uses to which knowledge is put. Epistemological relativism, in fact, is used to buttress advocacy, by maintaining that evidence should be rejected if it contravenes the

⁷⁷ Ivison et al. (eds), *Political Theory and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* and Sandra Tomsons and Lorraine Mayer (eds), *Philosophy and Aboriginal Rights: Critical Dialogues* (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁷⁸ Menno Boldt, *Surviving as Indians* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), p. xviii, in Alan C. Cairns, “Aboriginal Research in Troubled Times”, Unpublished research paper, University of Waterloo, December 19, 2008 [in author’s possession], p. 17.

⁷⁹ Ivison et al., “Introduction”, p. 4.

⁸⁰ Ivison et al., “Introduction”, p. 4.

⁸¹ Only a footnote is provided stating that “there were significant strands of moral and political thought that resisted such assumptions. For a discussion of some of these strands and their limits, see Padgen 1995. Ivison et al., “Introduction”, p. 259.

⁸² Philipose, “Decolonizing Political Theory”.

⁸³ Wendy Brown, “Political Theory Is Not a Luxury: A Response to Timothy Kaufman-Osborn’s ‘Political Theory as a Profession’”, *Political Research Quarterly*, 63(3), September 2010), p. 680.

goals of groups that are perceived to be oppressed. Science, rather than being accepted as a method to develop knowledge, is perceived as an enabler of colonization.

Although it is apparent that advocacy's denial of the capacity to acquire knowledge – either with scientific or humanistic methods – prevents some strands of decolonizing political theory from being included within political science, there needs to be an examination of the implications of including this work in the discipline. Rehfeld's discussion of advocacy is a good starting point, but his analysis does not examine the impact of advocacy's inclusion. As a result, the extremely harmful effects that advocacy has on political science has not been articulated. It needs to be recognized that the intrusion of advocacy creates serious problems for pursuing the truth about the nature of politics and government, especially in the areas of critical thinking and academic freedom.

Advocacy's Impact on Critical Thinking and Academic Freedom

Critical thinking is recognized as being particularly important in political theory because of the role that the subfield plays in political science. In a survey undertaken amongst political scientists in the United States, for example, it was indicated that “encouraging the development of critical thinking skills and the ability to form rigorous arguments” was an aspect of political theory that was widely accepted.⁸⁴ A letter from a number of political scientists defending the place of political theory in the discipline noted that “it is essential to the well-trained political scientist and teacher, whether in American, Comparative, IR [International Relations], or Public Law, that they have a training that includes an underpinning in political theory and critical thinking”, and therefore it should be part of the “mandatory curricula”.⁸⁵

Political theorists, therefore, should be concerned about advocacy's impact on critical thinking in the subfield, particularly in the teaching of political science. Critical thinking does not mean demanding that students unconditionally oppose the “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” on ideological grounds, as critical race theorists would assert (although they might choose to pursue this line of argument).⁸⁶ Instead, critical thinking requires that the assumptions of arguments be evaluated according to the accuracy and validity of the evidence used. As Stephen Brookfield has argued, “...to mandate in advance...that only one ideological interpretation or outcome is permitted...is to contradict a fundamental tenet of critical thinking. That tenet holds that all involved...must always be open to reexamining the assumptions informing their ideological commitments”.⁸⁷

To be consistent with the requirements of critical thinking, therefore, the arguments being made in favour of decolonization must be supported with accurate and valid evidence. But the examination of assumptions is avoided in many decolonizing political theory initiatives. This is

⁸⁴ 83.3 percent of the political theorists responding noted that encouraging the development of critical thinking skills and the ability to form rigorous arguments was ‘very important’ to their understanding of political theory, another 13.0 percent said it was ‘important,’ and 2.7 percent said it was ‘moderately important.’ No other descriptor of political theory received anywhere near this level of consensus”. Hawkesworth, “From Constitutive Outside...”, note 11, p. 695.

⁸⁵ October 12, 2007 letter, cited in Kaufman-Osborn, “Political Theory as Profession and as Subfield”, p. 655.

⁸⁶ This terminology was coined by Bell Hooks. See “Cultural Criticism & Transformation”, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zQUuHFKP-9s> [accessed May 2013].

⁸⁷ Stephen D. Brookfield, *Teaching for Critical Thinking*, p. 134.

because these initiatives are being influenced by the politics of identity, where a group gains “a political advantage from whatever makes it identifiable *as a group*”.⁸⁸ While teaching and research in political science has been hindered in the past because it excluded the views of aboriginal people and limited an important source of knowledge for non-aboriginal peoples,⁸⁹ identity politics demands that “special consideration be given to the interests and opinions of members of an oppressed group”. This is because identity politics assumes that “such people must be presumed to be especially knowing and virtuous, at least with respect to situations related to their oppressed condition”.⁹⁰

The demand that researchers and students must be committed to a particular political position - “decolonization” - contradicts the fundamental tenet of critical thinking noted above by Brookfield. This has resulted in the impoverishment of theoretical developments in political science. As Alan Cairns has pointed out, it is common for scholars studying aboriginal issues to take on the role of “academic missionary” and to use their research in “serving a cause”.⁹¹ There is now concern that research findings can “soften the impact of colonialism by minimizing its negative effects”,⁹² appropriate “the voice” of aboriginal peoples, or be culturally inappropriate because it is assumed that one has to identify as aboriginal to be able to understand this group.⁹³ There is a tendency for the aspirations of aboriginal organizations to be accepted without question for fear of being accused of racism, expressing “hate” towards aboriginal people, or being colonialist in intent.⁹⁴

Although this discouragement of critical thinking has a negative impact on the entire discipline, it has the most harmful consequences for those who have been historically oppressed by colonization. This is because it results in “the cognitive and moral debilitation of the oppressed”.⁹⁵ As the Australian aboriginal commentator Kerryn Pholi has pointed out, the restriction of comments out of “respect” for aboriginal peoples “stymies the necessary self-reflection and debate that is a catalyst for change”. Pholi notes that attempts to prevent aboriginal people from being offended “only discourages intelligent people from engaging with and critically examining aboriginal problems”. She goes on to point out that “excessive deference to Aboriginal demands for ‘respect’ has left many Aboriginal people unskilled in public discourse, with a tendency to conflate contrary opinion with oppression, criticism with abuse, disapproval with racism, and speaking *about* Aboriginal issues with presumptively speaking *for* Aboriginal people”. It has resulted, according to Pholi, in “an *intellectual* ghetto, where only those deemed to be appropriately respectful will be permitted to discuss an increasingly impoverished range of ideas”.⁹⁶ The low level of debate on aboriginal issues is noted by Alan Cairns, who points out that “while we now have the benefit of multiple

⁸⁸ Noretta Koertge and Daphne Patai, *Professing Feminism*, p. 50.

⁸⁹ Cairns, “Aboriginal Research in Troubled Times”, p. 5.

⁹⁰ Koertge and Patai *Professing Feminism*, p. 81.

⁹¹ Cairns, “Aboriginal Research in Troubled Times”, p. 16.

⁹² Cairns, “Aboriginal Research in Troubled Times”, p. 15.

⁹³ Cairns, “Aboriginal Research in Troubled Times”, footnote 2, p. 2.

⁹⁴ For a recent example of this, see Sandra Tomsons, “Part IV: Dialogue”, in Tomsons and Mayer (eds), *Philosophy and Aboriginal Rights*, p. 400.

⁹⁵ Koertge and Patai, *Professing Feminism*, p. 76.

⁹⁶ Kerryn Pholi, “Silencing Dissent Inside the Aboriginal Industry”, *Quadrant*, December 2012, LVI(12).

participants, we also have various impediments that reduce the quality of our discussion of how we are to live together”.⁹⁷

In addition to the difficulties that certain strands of decolonizing political theory pose for critical thinking, advocacy creates serious problems for academic freedom and the subsequent constraints on research. According to the American Association of University Professors, academic freedom assumes that “professors have a primary responsibility to seek and to state the truth as they see it”.⁹⁸ This responsibility ensures that professors have “...the right, without restriction by prescribed doctrine, to freedom of teaching and discussion”.

Many initiatives attempting to decolonize political theory, however, attempt to restrict, by prescribed doctrine, teaching, research and discussion. The prescribed doctrine in this case is the demand for “decolonization” - that all work that is done in the subfield must support a particular conception of self-determination, including the “inherent sovereignty”, for indigenous peoples. A number of decolonization initiatives, like activist women’s studies programs, therefore, “tend to constrict, rather than open, mental horizons, and tighten, rather than enlarge, argument”.⁹⁹ This tendency in political science has been observed by Alan Cairns who points to the extensive politicization that has occurred in the study of aboriginal issues. Cairns notes that

an academic publication on an Aboriginal issue may not be evaluated solely or primarily on its merits as a piece of academic research, but in a number of cases will additionally be viewed through [a] political lens. A scholarly article or book will be seen as aiding, or damaging, the pursuit of some political goal or objective. Unless he or she is particularly obtuse, a prospective author will understand that dangerous territory lies ahead. If the research project proceeds, the language that is employed will be carefully considered, and the questions that are asked might not be the researcher’s first choice. A cautious scholar may even conclude that some subjects are best left for another day when passions have cooled, or that a safer less politicized field has greater attraction.¹⁰⁰

Cairns shares concerns with J.R. Miller (a historian) and Noel Dyck (an anthropologist) about the “political correctness” and “academic self-censorship” that is pervasive in the study of aboriginal issues.¹⁰¹ He points out that “all who do research and publish in this politicized area have a consciousness that they are local participants in a global post-imperial arena that seeks to reorder relationships between indigenous peoples and the states in which they live”.¹⁰² Scholars understand that “what they write may have consequences outside the academy, and that there are prevailing narratives which act as [a] lens through which scholarly work on Aboriginal issues will, by some, be judged”.¹⁰³ This is a threat to scholarly integrity and has resulted in “a lessened supply of dispassionate understanding”.¹⁰⁴ Advocacy’s implications for quality

⁹⁷ Cairns, “Aboriginal Research in Trouble Times”, p. 5.

⁹⁸ The American Association of University Professors, 1966.

⁹⁹ Koertge and Patai, *Professing Feminism*, p. 80.

¹⁰⁰ Cairns, “Aboriginal Research in Troubled Times”, pp. 2-3.

¹⁰¹ Cairns, “Aboriginal Research in Troubled Times”, footnote 2, p. 2.

¹⁰² Cairns, “Aboriginal Research in Troubled Times”, p. 10.

¹⁰³ Cairns, “Aboriginal Research in Troubled Times”, p. 15; Noel Dyck, “Canadian Anthropology and the Ethnography of ‘Indian Administration’”, 2006, p. 87, cited in Cairns, “Aboriginal Research in Troubled Times”, pp. 16-17.

¹⁰⁴ Cairns, “Aboriginal Research in Troubled Times”, p. 17.

scholarship can be seen most clearly in a quote provided by Daniel Boxberger, an anthropologist who works closely with aboriginal organizations. According to Boxberger, aboriginal communities' now expect that an academic's work will have "some practical application in respect to land, resources, and self-determination". An academic's cooperation in this regard, in Boxberger's view, is not just due to pragmatism, but is a moral and ethical imperative. This is because Boxberger accepts the postmodern relativist position that all research is political; he only hopes for "a shift from a politically motivated research agenda directed by the nation-state to a politically motivated research agenda directed by the Fourth World state".¹⁰⁵

With respect to political science, it is acknowledged that a restrictive climate exists in the examination of aboriginal issues. Cairns notes that during the constitutional debates of the 1980s, for example, "there was a high degree of unwillingness to say anything that might be construed as unsympathetic to Aboriginal aspirations, such as impediments to or limitations of grandiose self-government ambitions for the small populations, under 500, of most Indian bands, or in the practical difficulties of self-government without a land base".¹⁰⁶ Many academics, including political scientists, "were warned that high costs may follow any 'deviation from the generally sympathetic orientation towards native rights'".¹⁰⁷ As a result, the "few scholars who have dared to express doubts about the appropriateness, and indeed authenticity, of aboriginal claims have been attacked and even ridiculed, regardless of the substance of their concerns".¹⁰⁸ This circumstance is exacerbated by the fact that aboriginal scholars are reluctant to criticize each other and are seen as traitors when they question the claims of aboriginal leaders.¹⁰⁹ This leads to limitations on free speech and association, as well as the obstruction of the intellectual dynamism created by open and honest debate. Calvin Helin notes that it is even harder for non-aboriginal people to critically analyze indigenous politics as they are likely to be accused of racism.¹¹⁰

One concrete example of the influence that advocacy is having on research is the case of the *Final Report* of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. As Alan Cairns explains, "the Commission's Report displayed a remarkable selectivity in its inclusion and exclusion of certain realities" and this selectivity was related to the Royal Commission's political purpose. Cairns notes that the Royal Commission's research was "undertaken on behalf of a vision of the future position of Aboriginal peoples in Canada that the Commission sought to foster, a vision whose plausibility would have been weakened by a more candid presentation". Cairns points out that the Royal Commission downplayed the increasing urban character of the aboriginal population, made surprisingly little efforts to examine the circumstances of those with aboriginal ancestry who do not identify as aboriginal, and did not discuss intermarriage between aboriginal and non-aboriginal people. Instead, it focused on reserve communities, often to the point of erroneously portraying them as manifesting an idyllic existence, because, as "bastions of indigenous difference", they were consistent with the Royal Commission's political perspective of

¹⁰⁵ Boxberger cited in Kennedy 2008, p. 121, cited in Cairns, "Aboriginal Research in Troubled Times", pp. 17-18.

¹⁰⁶ Cairns, "Aboriginal Research in Troubled Times", p. 18.

¹⁰⁷ Gibbins and Jhappan 1989, p. 211, cited in Cairns, "Aboriginal Research in Troubled Times", p. 18.

¹⁰⁸ Gibbins and Jhappan, p. 24, cited in Cairns, "Aboriginal Research in Troubled Times", p. 18.

¹⁰⁹ Cairns refers to the views of aboriginal academics Emma LaRocque and Joyce Green to support this claim. See Cairns, "Aboriginal Research in Troubled Times", pp. 19-20, 22.

¹¹⁰ Cairns, "Aboriginal Research in Troubled Times", p. 21.

“parallelism” (increasing autonomy for aboriginal peoples).¹¹¹ Cairns maintains that these omissions and distortions can be directly linked to the Royal Commission’s efforts “to stress the separateness and distinctiveness of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada”.¹¹² The Royal Commission was reluctant to incorporate any findings that would indicate that assimilation could be beneficial, since it was intent on promoting a particular political orientation.¹¹³

Such selectivity, especially in a Royal Commission, results in a failure to achieve “the goal of quality independent advice...”.¹¹⁴ This problem is becoming increasingly apparent in studies of aboriginal issues – a circumstance that is likely to continue in the future. As Cairns points out,

in an era of identity politics, sympathy for and empathy with Aboriginal peoples as they struggle to advance themselves will be widespread. Some scholars, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, will become part of an intelligentsia in support of Aboriginal causes. Intermittently they will experience conflict between what their research tells them and the cause they have identified with.¹¹⁵

While such circumstances are expected in political movements, decolonizing political theory initiatives are operating within the context of the provision of a liberal education, where debate and the free exchange of ideas are expected. As a result, problems will erupt because of the contradiction between politicized academic environments and the expectations of the academy. As will be shown in the following sections, these problems are evident in attempts to understand indigenous politics and aboriginal–non-aboriginal relations in the discipline of political science.

Advocacy and Theorizing Aboriginal-Settler Relations

Some strands of decolonizing political theory, therefore, by prescribing “decolonization” as an ideological position that must be accepted, constitute advocacy, not research. In accordance with Rehfeld’s definition, they are “primarily concerned with effecting change, rather than seeking to know things about the world as such”.¹¹⁶ With respect to aboriginal-settler relations, many decolonizing political theory initiatives promote the *recognition* of indigenous rights and sovereignty, rather than seeking to *understand* indigenous politics and government and aboriginal-settler relations.

One of the major aspects of advocacy oriented decolonizing political theory initiatives is they demand that indigenous “theories and methodologies” be respected in political science. But these theories and methodologies are not rigorous,¹¹⁷ and are actually anti-scientific and anti-humanistic. According to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, for example, these theories and methodologies have four characteristics - they embrace subjectivity, believe in the supernatural, uncritically accept oral accounts, and oppose the idea of progress and evolution.

¹¹¹ Cairns, “Aboriginal Research in Troubled Times”, p. 23.

¹¹² Cairns, “Aboriginal Research in Troubled Times”, p. 24.

¹¹³ Cairns, “Aboriginal Research in Troubled Times”, p. 25.

¹¹⁴ Cairns, “Aboriginal Research in Troubled Times”, p. 26.

¹¹⁵ Cairns, “Aboriginal Research in Troubled Times”.

¹¹⁶ Rehfeld, “Offensive Political Theory”, p. 476.

¹¹⁷ Widdowson, “Native Studies and Political Science: The Implications of ‘Decolonizing the Discipline’”, forthcoming.

Incorporating indigenous theories and methodologies in political science, for example, would mean uncritically accepting the views of Taiaiake Alfred, an indigenous political scientist teaching at the University of Victoria.¹¹⁸ Alfred argues that “to be a real Indigenous intellectual, one must be a warrior of the truth”,¹¹⁹ but “truth”, for Alfred, is demanding that indigenous intellectual traditions be “honoured”. This includes asserting that aboriginal peoples lived a “harmonious existence” before contact based on spiritual relationships, and that this was “angrily torn down” by colonialism and replaced with “anti-nature ways of life” and “coercive regimes of control”.¹²⁰ It is also maintained by Alfred that universities are “the heart of Whiteness” because they perpetuate “the glorification of Western societies as the highest form of human organization, and promote the emulation of North American culture to the next generation of citizens (and to Indigenous students as well unless there is some critical intervention)”.¹²¹ Academe should be “reordered”, according to Alfred, so that there can be a “fight for political independence in the face of state sovereignty” and indigenous cultures can be regenerated so as to ensure the future survival of indigenous nations.¹²²

But how does incorporating these views increase our understanding of the political world? What happens if a researcher challenges the intellectual traditions that Alfred insists must be honoured? What evidence exists that indigenous peoples lived a “harmonious existence” before contact? What are the “anti-nature ways of life” that aboriginal people have adopted, and how does the notion of a “natural” indigenous existence enhance the discipline’s understanding of aboriginal-settler relations?

Uncritically incorporating perspectives like Alfred’s into the discipline enables a number of erroneous conceptions about indigenous politics and government and aboriginal-settler relations to become entrenched in the discipline. These inaccuracies are then used to deny one of the major projects of the advocacy strands of decolonizing political theory – ridding the subfield of notions of historical progress.

Another problem created by the advocacy strands of decolonizing political theory concerns political science’s analysis of political concepts.¹²³ As was noted earlier, political theorists like Rehfeld maintain that “getting political concepts right is...part of political science properly conceived”. But how does decolonizing political theory improve our understanding of indigenous politics and government, both domestically and internationally?

One of the concepts examined in attempts to decolonize political theory, for example, is the idea of indigenous sovereignty. Instead of accepting the elements of the standard definition – “supreme legal authority”/“comprehensive authority” in a jurisdiction/territory,¹²⁴ it is noted that notions of sovereignty should be reconceptualized to recognize indigenous claims for self-

¹¹⁸ Alfred, along with James Tully, was originally scheduled to provide commentary on the talks given on decolonizing political theory at the Canadian Political Science Association in 2012. For an example of the uncritical acceptance of Alfred’s views, see Coulthard, “Subjects of Empire”, pp. 447, 452, 455.

¹¹⁹ Alfred, “Warrior Scholarship”, p. 95.

¹²⁰ Alfred, “Warrior Scholarship”, p. 89.

¹²¹ Alfred, “Warrior Scholarship”, p. 96.

¹²² Alfred, “Warrior Scholarship”, pp. 93, 96.

¹²³ Frances Widdowson, Ezra Voth and Miranda Anderson, “Studying Indigenous Politics in Canada”, unpublished paper presented at the Canadian Political Science Association, University of Alberta, June 2012.

¹²⁴ Ivison et al., “Introduction”, p. 14.

determination. It is asserted that indigenous sovereignty is perceived as “successionless” and that “some argue that indigenous peoples exercised historical sovereignty over their lands and communities and therefore possessed an ‘inherent’ sovereignty that was unjustly taken away and should be returned to them”.¹²⁵ It is also pointed out that other political theorists maintain that “recourse to treaties presupposes that the indigenous peoples involved are sovereign”.¹²⁶

But does such a reconceptualization of sovereignty enhance our understanding of the political world? Equating indigenous sovereignty with the sovereignty of states creates problems for our understanding of indigenous politics and aboriginal-settler relations. It prevents the recognition that internal colonialism is much different than the colonialism that existed in Africa and Asia. There is a failure to understand that assimilationist policies were not just an arbitrary exercise of power by malicious and racist colonialists, but an attempt by states to manage large and complex economies and societies.¹²⁷ As Alan Cairns points out, “the state is in the business of making citizens” and therefore it is necessary for the state to

regulate the domestic environment it encounters in order to simplify its tasks. This results in pressure for a common citizenship, common education, a population whose members can be tabulated in terms of easily identifiable categories, etc. The purpose served by these and other policy thrusts is to simplify the task of governance. Hence an unregulated diversity is seen as administratively awkward.¹²⁸

The solution to internal colonialism historically, Cairns argues, was assimilation because granting autonomy for indigenous peoples had the potential to disrupt “the shape and future of the domestic society...”.¹²⁹ Cairns notes that it is much more difficult for indigenous peoples to escape internal colonialism than is the case for colonized peoples “distanced from the imperial center...”.¹³⁰ because the latter can enter into the international system as sovereign states.

Decolonizing political theory’s advocacy agenda, however, prevents this fundamental difference between internal and external colonialism from being recognized. The erroneous comparison of indigenous demands for “sovereignty” with the self-determination struggles of overseas colonies adds to the resentment of aboriginal peoples, who “have to settle for what appears as a shrunken goal when contrasted with Third World possibilities”. Settler states cannot meet the demands of indigenous peoples’ “preferred citizenship regime”, and therefore stalemate often ensues.¹³¹ As Alan Cairns explains, “simply put, there is a conflict, a basic incompatibility, between the contemporary version of the modern democratic state and the aspirations of many indigenous peoples in Canada and elsewhere. One result is a frustrated nationalism which shows no signs of disappearance”.¹³²

What Cairns does not elaborate upon, however, are the reasons behind the persistent efforts to equate aboriginal self-determination with the circumstances of “stateless nations” like the

¹²⁵ Ivison et al., “Introduction”, p. 9.

¹²⁶ Ivison et al., “Introduction”, p. 13.

¹²⁷ Cairns, “Aboriginal Research in Troubled Times”, p. 7.

¹²⁸ Cairns, “Aboriginal Research in Troubled Times”, p. 6.

¹²⁹ Cairns, “Aboriginal Research in Troubled Times”, p. 6.

¹³⁰ Cairns, “Aboriginal Research in Troubled Times”, p. 9.

¹³¹ Cairns, “Aboriginal Research in Troubled Times”, p. 10.

¹³² Cairns, “Aboriginal Research in Troubled Times”, p. 26.

Quebecois (that have the capacity to become states) and oversees colonies that have become states. A major reason is the influence of advocacy initiatives like those who are trying to decolonize political theory. Instead of having civil debates about what future is possible for small and dispersed kinship-based groupings with little hope for economic development, ideological policing is used to coerce recognition of aboriginal peoples' demands for "inherent sovereignty".

This impact of decolonizing political theory advocacy on research about political concepts has now spread into the subfield of international relations. The CPSA/ISA-Canada section on International Relations (IR), for example, asserts in its call for proposals that "for a field of study that claims as its subject matter the interactions between sovereign entities, the near absence of IR research on the self-determination of Indigenous peoples and nations is striking".¹³³ While it is implied that the paucity of research is due to international relations' complicity in colonialism and its justification of indigenous marginalization, this view fails to critically analyze the assumption that indigenous peoples constitute "sovereignty entities" that signed treaties similar to those developed by states.

The assertions about inherent indigenous sovereignty can also be seen in political science's current understanding of domestic indigenous governance. It is now asserted that aboriginal groups had legal systems before contact, although this used to be a contentious area of anthropology.¹³⁴ The unquestioned acceptance of the existence of this circumstance is related to one of the legal grounds upon which British sovereignty was asserted over indigenous peoples – the doctrine of discovery. This doctrine was based on "the idea that the inhabitants lived under such rudimentary conditions of social organization that they could not be considered sovereign peoples", and it was used historically "to deny that indigenous peoples had any legal or political rights other than those derived from the colonial sovereign".¹³⁵ Here one can see the possibilities for advocacy entering into research in this area; pressure is placed on researchers to assert that legal systems existed at the time of contact so as to make a political case for "indigenous sovereignty".

Iverson et al., in fact, assert that the notion that the social organization of aboriginal peoples was rudimentary is now "discredited", even though no evidence is put forward to show how this is the case.¹³⁶ All that is provided is a quote from Henry Reynolds, an Australian historian, and Michael Asch, a Canadian anthropologist. Both assert that the doctrine of discovery is incorrect because it assumes that aboriginal people at the time of contact were primitive and uncivilized.¹³⁷ This view, we are told, is incorrect because it has been repudiated by court decisions and is based on "ethnocentric and racist" assumptions that are "repugnant to contemporary values".¹³⁸

But these assertions reflect the failure of advocacy initiatives to distinguish between knowledge and the use to which knowledge is put. What aboriginal forms of political organization were like

¹³³ <http://www.cpsa2013event.ca/workshops.php> [accessed May 2013].

¹³⁴ I have discussed this circumstance elsewhere, and will not do so here. See Frances Widdowson, "The Political Economy of Aboriginal 'Customary Law'", Paper Presented at the 2nd Biennial Conference of The Canadian Initiative in Law, Culture and the Humanities, Carleton University, October 12-14, 2007.

¹³⁵ Iverson et al, "Introduction", p. 12.

¹³⁶ Iverson et al., "Introduction", p. 3.

¹³⁷ Iverson et al., "Introduction", p. 12.

¹³⁸ Cited in Iverson et al, "Introduction", p. 12.

at the time of contact is a much different matter than normative discussions about how British colonial officials should have responded to this historical circumstance or, more significantly, what should occur today. Furthermore, the decisions of court cases cannot be considered rigorous research because they are attempts to resolve disputes, not forums constructed to pursue the truth. The question of the nature of politics and governance in aboriginal societies – both historically and contemporarily - needs to be substantiated with evidence, not imposed with argumentation based on appeals to judicial authority and special pleading. Such an investigation, however, is becoming increasingly difficult in political science because the prescribed doctrine of decolonization prevents researchers from stating the truth as they see it.

This revision of concepts such as “sovereignty” and “law” to fit the imperatives of advocacy also has implications for normative political theory. As was mentioned earlier, “normative theory is helpful in understanding the political world as it is” because it can “illustrate that the way things are...does not necessarily correspond with the way things ought to be...”.¹³⁹ But decolonizing political theory’s advocacy orientation has a tendency to distort “the ways things are”. This makes it very difficult to determine “the way things ought to be” with respect to aboriginal-non-aboriginal relations.

Decolonization Advocacy and Political Theory

After looking at the requirements for political theory and contrasting these with attempts to “decolonize” the subfield, it is apparent that some decolonizing political theory initiatives do not belong in political science. Most attempts to decolonize the subfield challenge the use of scientific and humanistic methods in their examination of the political world. Much of decolonizing political theory, in fact, would be characterized by the political scientist Andrew Rehfeld as advocacy.

Although Rehfeld makes an initial attempt to explain why advocacy should be excluded from political science, his arguments do not provide an analysis of the implications of including advocacy in the discipline. This is because Rehfeld’s major preoccupation is in making a distinction between scientific and humanistic research. While Rehfeld argues for the exclusion of humanistic research from political science, this is still a matter of intense debate amongst political scientists. All scholars, however, should balk at the prospect of embracing advocacy in their disciplines as it challenges the idea that knowledge can be pursued in the academy.

Advocacy’s corrosive impact on political science is due to the fact that it is actually contrary to research. As such, it *impedes* knowledge development and acquisition. It distorts our understanding of concepts, norms and the nature of politics and government since its intent is on coercing academic support for a preconceived advocacy goal.

Nowhere can the impact of advocacy seen more clearly than in decolonizing political theory’s intrusion into political science’s understanding of indigenous politics and aboriginal-settler relations. There is a potential for erroneous information to be accepted because of dictates to “honour” indigenous intellectual traditions; the concepts of sovereignty, rights and law are redefined so that a case can be made for the prescribed doctrine of decolonization. The teaching of political science is also impeded because the advocacy orientation of decolonizing political

¹³⁹ Rehfeld, “Decolonizing Political Theory”, p. 475.

theory restricts the academic interpretation of aboriginal-settler relations. Those arguing that political theory should be decolonized are resistant to questioning the assumptions that they are using to promote aboriginal self-determination.

Many political scientists are in favour of supporting the political aspirations of aboriginal groups. This support, however, should be based on a full understanding of indigenous politics and governance and the history of aboriginal-settler relations. This understanding is undermined by advocacy initiatives that demand that only certain arguments and conclusions are permissible. Political science, therefore, should not be “decolonized” if this means substituting rigorous research, high quality scholarship and critical thinking with becoming an “ally” of aboriginal groups.