Rationalism and the silencing and distorting of Indigenous voices

Yann Allard-Tremblay
Sociology and political science
Glendon College, York University

Rationalism refers to a mode of theorizing that sees in universal reason the right tool to apprehend politics. It affirms that everything needs to be grounded in reason and it is optimistic that reason has the power to set all social and political institutions and practices on firm rational foundations. In this paper, I argue that this mode of theorizing is a source of epistemic violence in that it silences and distorts the voices of the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island. I firstly explain what this mode of theorizing is in greater detail. I secondly provide an account of the ways in which it is generally applied to the theorization of Indigenous peoples and to their political claims. Thirdly and fourthly, I explain how this rationalist mode of theorizing both silences and distorts the voices of Indigenous peoples. Finally, I explain what is entailed in opposing rationalism so as to hear Indigenous peoples in their own voices. I discuss two considerations about politics and political theory that should be kept in mind so as to avoid masking domination under the guise of reason and ignoring people's agency in determining the right structure of society.

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Introduction

The politics of reconciliation consists in reconciling the *sui generis* authority and continued distinct existence of Indigenous peoples with the sovereignty of the settler-state.[1] It could be argued that it is a form of critical politics: it seeks to transform current oppressive social and

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[1] This is broadly the type of formulation used by the Supreme Court of Canada to speak of the constitutional recognition of Aboriginal rights by the Canadian constitution (R. *v*. Van der Peet, Delgamuukw *v*. British Columbia).

political structures so as to ensure greater inclusion.[2] Indeed, un-reconciled colonial institutions enable all of the faces of oppression described by Young (2011, 40): 'exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence'. On this view, reconciliation seeks to transform the social and political orders to ensure that Indigenous peoples[3] can fully develop and exercise their capacities and that they can express their experience (Young 2011, 37).

Some mainstream political theorists and philosophers[4] can be said to have sought reconciliation, without this necessarily being their main purpose, in making Indigenous peoples and their situation an object of their theorizing. They have sought to address their plight: in considering the right relationship they should entertain with settler-states, in light of international law, global justice and other normative theories; or in considering what type of remediation they would be entitled to, or not, for past injustices; or what is the right type of deliberative

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[2] I acknowledge the critical perspective on reconciliation according to which it is a tool of domination since it legitimizes the past and ongoing dispossession of Indigenous peoples, especially of their lands (Coulthard 2014).

[3] My concern is primarily with some of the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island, especially on the lands currently claimed by Canada. I will use Indigenous peoples, but First Nations and American Indians could replace it.

[4] I will only use political theorists and political theory but these terms should be understood as including philosophy and philosophers.

democratic politics to structure their interactions. They can be said to have offered blueprints or directions to be followed in order to achieve a reconciled or just society.[5]

Notwithstanding, I am concerned that theory is often conducted in a rationalistic manner that is both deaf to some of the claims made by Indigenous peoples and that distorts some others. Without putting white gloves on, mainstream theory is often *about* Indigenous peoples, it is conducted by well-meaning scholars pursuing eurocentric knowledge (Battiste and Henderson 2000, Amin 1988), often addressing one another, in their own languages, using their own concepts, and putting forward their own normative standards conceived as universal and commending assent. It is as if Indigenous peoples were not themselves theorists of their own situation or of the right relationship. Their claims either have to be translated and understood in the voice of the settlers or are disqualified as archaic, folkloric or unscientific.[6] Indigenous peoples could retort to those theorists, like Antjie Krog (2009, 156): 'you don't hear us through

[5] I list some significant, but non-exhaustive, contributions: (Buchanan 2004, Butt 2009, Cairns 2000, Ivison *et al.* 2000, Kymlicka 2003, Kymlicka 2001, Kymlicka and Norman 2000, Lu 2017, Macklem and Sanderson 2016, Miller and Kumar 2007, Patten 2014, Schouls 2003, Waldron 1992, Young 2000).

[6] The work of Indigenous theorists often remain marginal notably by being considered as belonging to native studies as opposed to general political theory. See: (Alfred 2009, Coulthard 2014, Coyle and Borrows 2017, Simpson 2017, Turner 2006). Spivak (1994, 76 citing Foucault 1980) speaks of 'epistemic violence' in the case of '"subjugated knowledge"', that is '"a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity"'.

our own voice. You keep on hearing us only through *your* voice.' Despite seeking reconciliation, there is a sense in which theory appears to be reproducing the colonial mentality of assisting the poor natives out of their misery and appears to see them merely as an object, as opposed to agents, of theorizing. In other words, despite seeking reconciliation, political theory often oppresses through cultural imperialism.[7]

As Young (2011, 58-59) explains it: '[t]o experience cultural imperialism means to experience how the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of one's own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one's group and mark it out as the Other.' Another way of getting at this form of oppression is provided by Battiste (2000, 192-193): '[c]ognitive imperialism, also known as cultural racism, is the imposition of one worldview on a people who have an alternative worldview, with the implication that the imposed worldview is superior to the alternative worldview.'[8]

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[7] A concern here is that by referring to Indigenous peoples in general, I may also be amalgamating those actual, real world, agents and making them transparent. From my position as a theorist, I would be seeing their real interests while denying that I am in a position to do so (Spivak 1994, 74-75). The term Indigenous peoples indeed masks the real diversity of peoples, interests, views and voices of those included under that term. It nonetheless is useful to collectively refer to those peoples who have being subjected to colonialism, dispossession and assimilation policies by settler-states. We are bound to resort to abstraction like this one, yet we can remain aware of the underlying diversity and of the fact that actual (in this case, indigenous) agents retain the voices to which I refer.

[8] See also: Rollo (2014, 225).

In this paper, I explore and explain how this form of oppression rears its ugly face in political theorizing.[9] I do not take a specific author or theory as my target. Rather, I am concerned with a specific mode of theorizing, which various theories can exemplify to different degrees. My point is that we should focus on this mode of theorizing as one of the main roots of this form of oppression in political theory. More precisely, I want to criticize what can be called rationalism, following Oakeshott (1962). Rationalism refers to a mode of theorizing that sees in universal human reason the all-powerful tool to interpret society, politics and the world. It rejects precedents, traditions and custom. I argue that despite well-meant concerns for justly treating Indigenous peoples, rationalist political theory is often oppressive in silencing and distorting their voices.[10]

Some could argue that post-colonial theory has already provided arguments to that effect and I do not disagree (Said 1979, Spivak 1994). Yet, for various reasons that it would be worth investigating, it has not radically transformed contemporary mainstream political theory. These arguments remain postcolonial arguments that belong to Indigenous studies, African American Studies, and other qualified studies as opposed to mainstream theory; such that political theorists are often concerned with decolonization, reconciliation and what has come to be known as epistemic (in)justice (Fricker 2007) without fully realizing that they are not hearing Indigenous

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[9] Rollo (2009) and Vermette (2009) each respectively speak of how this takes place in law, notably due to the stable framework of crown sovereignty. Young (2000, 2011) has also offered much material to think about this form of oppression in politics and political theory.

[10] Criticizing rationalism is not a performative contradiction. My target is not reason itself, but optimism around reason as a sufficient way of coming to insights into the world.

peoples in their own voices. There is still a need to push further on the path opened by postcolonial theorists.

In essence, this paper is aimed at an audience of political theorists concerned with reconciliation and epistemic justice. It seeks to bring their attention to the ways in which their supposedly inclusive rational theoretical discourse, both in its form and content, is too often eurocentric and not the *lingua franca* they imagine it to be. Ultimately, my aim can be described as illustrating how reconciliation needs to also be at work in political theorizing and that there cannot be epistemic justice until Indigenous peoples are heard in their own voices.

The paper is divided in five sections. In the first, I offer a summary of rationalism. In the second, I explain ways in which rationalism structures the theorization of Indigenous peoples. In the third and fourth, I explain how this renders theory deaf to certain claims of Indigenous peoples and how it distorts others. Finally, I discuss two considerations about politics and political theory that would make it possible to avoids masking domination under the guise of reason and ignoring people's agency in determining the right structure of society.

Rationalism in political theory

Rationalism is a mode of political theorizing. This refers to a manner of approaching the political world and political problems in light of certain explicit and implicit beliefs, attitudes, and views about the conduct of theorizing. In this case, these beliefs, attitudes and views ground political theorizing on universal human reason, both in interpreting the political world and in issuing analyses and directives. In this section, I explain what these beliefs and attitudes are and how they impact the conduct of political theory. This account follows Oakeshott's (1962) essay *Rationalism in Politics*.

In the history of ideas, Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine are often seen as offering the most contrasting representation of conservatism and rationalism. Burke argues for the relevance of stereotypes, tradition and custom. He fears the excesses of the French Revolution and the endeavour of the revolutionaries to construct a new and perfect society on universal rational foundations. As he wrote (1999, 114): '[w]e are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason; because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations, and of ages.' On the other hand, Paine argues that the past does not have authority over the present and that each generation is as free as the previous one to act. In other words, each generation and each person have a sufficient stock of reason to avoid availing themselves of the general bank and capital of the past. He further argues (1791, 76) that: 'what we now see in the world, from the Revolutions of America and France, are a renovation of the natural order of things, a system of principles as universal as truth and the existence of man'.

Rationalism, as an intellectual tradition, can be traced back to Paine and other Enlightenment thinkers. At its core are two attitudes: scepticism and optimism (Oakeshott 1962, 1). Rationalism is sceptical of anything that is not independently grounded and established by reason. Hence, anything—institutions, 'customs, norms, and beliefs' along with methods of acquiring knowledge—can be called to account, brought to the tribunal of reason, and required to be provided with some kind of 'rational accounts' to justify them, in a manner acceptable to each and every rational agent (Levy 2014, 27). There is then nothing that cannot be questioned.

The other attitude is one of optimism or faith in the power of human reason. Not only can anything be questioned by reason, but reason is also able to apprehend and appropriate anything: 'the Rationalist never doubts the power of his "reason" (when properly applied) to determine the

worth of a thing, the truth of an opinion or the propriety of an action' (Oakeshott 1962, 1-2). Unfettered reason is the instrument by which humans can understand the world and subjugate it to their will and needs. Thanks to reason and its appropriate use, notably through the scientific method, we can 'make ourselves the masters and (as it were) *owners* of nature' as Descartes (2007, 24) so perfectly described the ambition of enlightened human reason. This ambition is not limited to nature, it includes the mastery of society and politics.

Associated with these attitudes are two further typical beliefs. The first is 'a belief in a "reason" common to all mankind, a common power of rational consideration' (Oakeshott 1962, 2). It is a belief in a universal human rationality. We are all imbued with the same capacity for rational reflection such that there is no natural authority between us. The second belief is one in the convergence on truth, which could be associated with 'the uniqueness thesis' found in contemporary epistemology: rational agents, provided with the same set of evidence and following the right processes of reason—adequate evidence-based inductive and deductive reasoning, and more generally the scientific method—should normally arrive at the same conclusion (Feldman and Warfield 2010, 6). Divergences of opinion do not result from the proper functioning of reason. They need to be explained.[11] This is a belief in the fundamental unity, across contexts, of the natural, social and political worlds.

Rationalism interprets political society in function of those attitudes and beliefs. It holds human reason to be the appropriate and only tool to interpret and question political society. For Oakeshott (1962, 5), it follows that rationalist politics is essentially defined by 'the politics of perfection' and 'the politics of uniformity'. The politics of perfection denies that there can be

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[11] Even if Rawls (2005, 56-58) affirms that pluralism is the normal consequence of reason under free institutions, this is still explained by the fact that judgement is *burdened.*

political problems that are beyond rational apprehension. Reason does not have a blind spot. There are always rational solutions. The politics of perfection opposes anything that departs from what reason mandates as concessions to power or circumstances. Reason should not be impeded in its structuring of society: *fiat justitia, ruat cælum*. Furthermore: 'from this politics of perfection springs the politics of uniformity; a scheme which does not recognize circumstance can have no place for variety' (Oakeshott 1962, 5-6) Truth is not diverse and truth is not dependent on circumstances. What reason mandates here is what reason mandates everywhere.

When applied to political societies in general, these assumptions and beliefs about human reason lead one towards a theory of progress and a conception of universal human history. Firstly, to the extent that human reason is conceived to be universal and that it is conceived as converging on the truth, it follows that all of humanity is striving towards the same truth. Societies progressively advance towards a fuller revelation of the truth, they do not stumble and wander from equally valid opinion to equally valid opinion. The correlative is a form of 'diffusionism', that is the superiority of the more advanced views (and populations) justifies the propriety and even necessity of propagating them to the less advanced populations (Battiste and Henderson 2000, 21). This secondly means that there is a universal history: the history of the progressive revelation of truth to humanity. Some societies are more advanced while others are less, but they all partake in the same process of rational progress and discovery. Humanity as a whole is on a path of progressive melioration, such that we could rank all human societies, past and present, on the universal arrow of progress.

As a mode of political theorizing, rationalism is a general category that includes multiple approaches. It includes what Williams (2005, 2) calls moralism. Moralism sees political theory as a form of 'applied morality', that is, it seeks to reform political society in light of the moral

requirements mandated by universal reason. Williams mentions two models of moralism, the first one being the '*enactment* model' which consists more or less in the direct application of moral requirements to political society, e.g. utilitarianism. The second model is what he calls the '*structural* model', which consists in laying 'down the moral conditions of co-existence under power'; Rawls's theory of justice being the prime example of this model. Rationalism also includes what is called elsewhere the modern perspective on political authorities. Following this modern perspective, the state is regarded as the supreme and final authority within any given political society and this society ought to be governed by a unique and uniform set of principles of justice (Allard-Tremblay 2018).

In sum, rationalist political theories, in their different forms, apprehend the political world and political problems through the lens of universal human reason and share commitments to universal solutions, uniformity of implementation and accessibility through adequate (scientific) reasoning.

Rationalism and theorizing Indigenous peoples

I now turn to ways in which rationalism structures the theorizing of Indigenous peoples and Indigenous politics. I focus on general patterns of political theorizing that may be observed in various approaches associated with rationalism and which have a particularly significant impact on the voices of Indigenous peoples: the theorization of politics, the interpretation of politics through firm concepts, the assessment of injustices and the search for solutions.

For rationalism, the political world is subordinated to, and has to be structured by the requirements of, universal rationality. It is not an independent field of human agency in which true order, justice and peace are defined and achieved. Rather, political interactions are subjected

to the commands of reason and the true nature of those concepts is defined through objective theorizing or constructed through some idealized procedure. As Levy (2017, 6) explains regarding 'the accounts of Grotius, Hobbes, Locke, Pufendorf, and Kant' but in manner that applies to rationalism more generally:

> reasons to enter into the [social] contract are timeless; they are demands of basic morality and rationality. Anyone who does not create the structure of a modern state has made a mistake of morality and/or rationality, failing to recognize the imperative of avoiding the war of all against all, or to cultivate and to protect property according to natural law, or to enter into relations of justice with other human beings.

This means that politics has a specific rationale and form. Without necessarily being a priori, the concepts through which political society is interpreted are also constructed independently from actual political agency. Deviations from those are not merely differences or reappropriation and reinterpretation by political agents; they are defective, irrational, and marked by inferiority. Rationalism does not acknowledge other forms of politics. The way in which it interprets politics is valid across time and space whether it is in Europe or on Turtle Island. Hence, Indigenous peoples are assumed to be under the same universal demands of morality to enter the social contract and to engage in politics, following the mandated forms.

From this subordination of politics to rationality comes also the fact that while political theory may be about politics, politics itself is not an act of theorizing. Politics needs to bend the knee before the requirements of rationality. Authors like Laden (2007), and Owen and Tully (2007) have referred to this manner of approaching the relationship between reason and politics as a theoretical approach. Political theory provides mandatory guidance for the conduct of politics. It defines either the exact actions to be carried out or the framework within which political actions may take place. On this view, the whole business of determining political conduct has already taken place at the theoretical level, following the mandate of rationality, and

thereby emptying politics of any substantive content. On this view, the condition of Indigenous peoples and their relationships with the settler-state ought to be thought from a theoretical point of view and in light of the requirements of rationality; such that the actual political agency of Indigenous peoples is not key to the definition of the right relationship.

Rationalism does not only dictate the rationale and form of politics, it also provides the concepts to interpret the political world and to direct political conduct. Albeit useful, these concepts, once defined, become the hard and stable framework through which actual politics is interpreted and often jammed through. Rationalism defines those concepts following necessary and sufficient conditions. These necessary and sufficient conditions, rather than being mere guides in our apprehension of reality, become hard criteria to assess and categorize reality. Concepts like nation, people, culture, state, social and ethnic groups, and countless others are used to interpret and classify the political world in tight compartments. Each of these typically comes with correlative normative considerations: nations should be self-determining; peoples have an interest in their self-respect; states are sovereign; cultures provide a context of choice and ought to be protected. The same concepts are used to interpret Indigenous peoples: they form nations, but not states; they possess group rights; their minority cultures ought to be protected. The conceptual theoretical framework is to be applied, for the most part, regardless of what Indigenous peoples themselves conceive their political ontology or political rights to be. There is a disjuncture between political theorizing and the political actions by which political agents might seek to reframe and redefine the concepts used to interpret them since objective reason must be the judge of politics, not the reverse. If Indigenous peoples call themselves nations, this is a claim that has to be assessed in light of the necessary and sufficient conditions attached to the concept. This is the mechanism that can be seen at work, notably, in the application of the

doctrine of discovery: the legitimate exercise of authority over the peoples of Turtle Island was assessed by considering whether they matched the rational criteria, e.g. of industrious use of land (Vattel 2008, 70), necessary and sufficient to be recognized as exercising sovereignty over their lands.

Furthermore, rationalist political theory ranks political interactions and political forms in light of their contribution to the flourishing of political actors' rationality. Levy (2017, 2) refers to this as a teleological view of political forms: 'we are most truly human, most truly ourselves, most truly mature moral actors, in the modern sovereign state' or any other political form seen by the rationalist theorist as allowing the maximal fulfillment of the requirement of rationality. Hence, Indigenous peoples and their own political forms, to the extent that they fall short of the political form towards which all human societies should strive are somewhat defective and inferior. Their 'tribes' would benefit from moving towards a more desirable political form like the state.

Finally, rationalist political theory is problem-driven and solution-oriented (Oakeshott 1962, 4-5). It generally proceeds through the identification of defects and injustices that prevent a society from fully realizing the requirements of rationality; or it proceeds by setting itself the task of resolving problems such as religious accommodation, cultural diversity, reconciliation, etc. In both cases, it then provides the blueprint to follow in order to realize justice. Moreover, as we have seen, the identified solutions require a uniform implementation that precludes pluralism, since 'to permit any relevant part of the society to escape from the solution' would be 'to countenance irrationality' (Oakeshott 1962, 6).

Silencing Indigenous peoples' voices

I now turn to two different, but non-exclusive, forms of cultural imperialism/epistemic violence associated with this mode of theorizing that prevent Indigenous peoples' voices from being adequately heard. The first one, addressed in this section, consists in the silencing of Indigenous peoples' voices. Alternatively, it could be said that rationalist theory is deaf to their voices. It is not that they cannot speak, but rather that their voices are not heard and their claims do not register. The second form, addressed in the next section, is the distortion of Indigenous voices.

The silencing of Indigenous voices is a phenomenon discussed by, amongst others, Battiste and Henderson (2000), Smith (2006), Spivak (1994) and Young (2000, 2011). This phenomenon relies on the relation between power and knowledge and on the claim to universality associated with the European rationalist tradition. As Smith (2006, 96) puts it: 'Western culture constantly reaffirms the West's view of itself as the centre of legitimate knowledge, the arbiter of what counts as knowledge and the source of "civilized" knowledge. This form of knowledge is generally referred to as "universal" knowledge, available to all and not really "owned" by anyone'. The dominance of the colonizing group and the claim to universality of the western knowledge system work together to make rationalism an imposed standard for knowledge. Anything that falls short of rationalism is superstition, pseudo-science and pseudo-knowledge and needs to be debunked by the light of reason. In other words: 'Indigenous peoples need the diffusion of creativity, imagination, invention, innovation, rationality, and sense of honor or ethics from Europe in order to progress' (Battiste and Henderson 2000, 21). Their own knowledge and voices, if they fall short of the rationalist standard, are discounted as defective and inferior. Their voices are silenced because they are not even recognized as valid claims and positions in light of rationalist expectations.

Moreover, as Rollo (2014, 227) explains, this form of epistemic violence can take place even if the colonized groups are included in formal forums. Indigenous peoples may formally be admitted to take part in politics and political theory, but just as the 'decision-making contexts … are hostile or indifferent' to their voices, so is the rationalist forum of political theory. This is most notably the case with the role and significance of stories in Indigenous views of politics and with the relational obligations and complex political forms they support.

As explained above, rationalism theorizes politics and social orders as dictated by universal human reason. On this view, the rational foundation of political society also provides the template for organizing society and the standard by which to judge political conduct and discourse such that valid claims are those that can be associated with those rational grounds. Indigenous peoples are also apprehended in light of this rational foundation. One consequence is that their stories and the role they play in structuring their politics and their social orders are not even perceived as theoretically relevant. When they are recognized by rationalist discourse, it is not as concurring theories about political society, but as less than fully rational beliefs and as objects to be studied by anthropology, ethnology and other western sciences.

Yet, as Maracle (2004, 27-29) writes:

> To most people, the story [of creation] I have just told is just that—a story. Quaint and colourful, yet, but just a story. But it is far more than that to the people who have been telling it since Shonkwaya'tíson told it to the first human beings. […] The Creation Story gives all *onkwehón:we* a shared way of thinking and looking at the world. […] Clearly, the Creation Story is more than just a story. We take its teachings to be the guiding light in how we conduct our lives.

The Creation Story is the record of when *onkwehón:we* were given their instructions and sacred responsibilities, of when their position in creation and how they relate to the rest of creation was explained. The Creation Story is a foundational narrative, the accuracy of which is maintained by

the various rules of the oral tradition, that offers an alternative account of politics than the one grounded in rationalism since it defines the position of *onkwehón:we* in the world, their relations and their responsibilities. But the Creation Story is only one of many stories, and type of stories, that are relevant from an Indigenous perspective to understand one's position and responsibilities in creation. Stories generally contain directives and teachings, such that they function as narratives through which humans and the rest of Creation are to be made sense of and their harmony defined.

Stories thus play a fundamental role in how Indigenous peoples interpret and theorize the world, politics included. As Stark (2012, 122) writes: '[s]tories shape how we see and interact with the world. They lend insight into the ways in which we see our communities as well as how we see ourselves within these communities.' From the Indigenous perspective, these stories are the starting point from which we should be talking about politics. They structure political conduct just like the rational foundational stories of political theory are meant to. From the rationalist perspective, however, Indigenous stories are merely stories. They are cultural artefacts and thus they might register as relevant to understanding given cultures, but they will not register as competing accounts of politics and of being in the world. The social contract stories Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau told are not considered to be on the same level as the story of Sky Woman falling on the big turtle's back. Rational political theory sees itself as above these cultural artefacts, as if it was not itself a product of culture or of the western worldview.[12] Furthermore,

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[12] Either culture refers to everything we do as humans and then it refers to nothing relevant when we qualify something of cultural, or it serves the purpose of differentiating between universal and parochial discourse, which in this context is precisely the point under contention. On the Indigenous and Western worldviews, see Little Bear (2000).

and to the extent that these stories have no rational basis, political theory will be deaf to the claim that is made when, for instance, an Indigenous group appeals to the Creation Story. At best, this claim will be distorted and reframed as a cultural claim in need of accommodation. Just as the oral tradition faces difficulties being heard in courts (Manley-Casimir 2012), the oral tradition faces difficulties being recognized as a ground to apprehend politics.

From this incapacity of rationalist political theory to hear the stories of Indigenous peoples, along with their full implications, flows another incapacity, that of adequately registering the normative idea of relatedness. We are all related: humans, non-humans, animate and inanimate. We are all part of Creation and each one of us has a part of Creation in us. Since we are all related, our good depends on the good of the others. We should strive for balance and harmony. Furthermore, since we are all related, we have a responsibility towards our relatives and we are accountable to them. Despite variations, this holistic understanding of Creation is generally offered by Indigenous stories. This interrelated understanding of one's position in the world entails various requirements about political conduct, notably regarding the respect owed to other living and non-living beings, such as giving thanks and not taking more than required. It entails that nature is not there to be possessed and dominated as in Descartes' vision of the future. Rather, nature is something we are part of. As Corntassel (2012, 96) explains: '[a]s a refutation to a resource extraction-based economy, Indigenous peoples practice and honor their sustainable relationships. A Cherokee word that describes a sustainable relationship is digadatsele'i or 'we belong to each other'. Belonging to each other in the broadest sense means that we are accountable and responsible to each other and the natural world.'

This entails that political relationships need to be understood precisely as that, ongoing relationships that need to be sustained. Hence, politics is much more like a conversation and a

friendship than a contract specifying rights and duties. This is why Mills (2017, 225) can argue that treaties are 'frameworks for rights relationships: the total relational means by which we orient and reorient ourselves to each other through time, to live well together and with all our relations within creation' as opposed to contracts as 'legal instruments'. Furthermore, it means that a political relationship can be understood in a much broader sense than under the rationalist perspective would admit:

> According to Nishnaabeg traditions, it is my understanding that our relationship with the moose nation, the deer nation, and the caribou nation is a treaty relationship like any other, and all the parties involved have both rights and responsibilities in terms of maintaining the agreement and the relationship between our nations. The treaty outlines a relationship that when practices continually and in perpetuity, maintains peaceful coexistence, respect, and mutual benefit (Simpson 2008, 35).

The political order is not limited to rational human beings, as rationalism would have it.

Not only does rationalism restrict the political order to human beings, it also provides the concepts according to which this order should be apprehended. In doing so, it precludes Indigenous concepts and practices. For instance, treaties are generally interpreted as contracts, done at some point in time, specifying rights and duties. The idea of a treaty consisting in the establishment of kinship relationships, which need to be polished, sustained and renewed (Barsh 1986, 194), is simply inconsistent with this interpretation. It would then be discarded. When political theorists seek to address the problem of the right relationship between the state and Indigenous peoples, they might seek the full and complete terms of relationship that could be implemented in treaties. But in proceeding this way, they would completely be deaf to Indigenous people's understanding of political relationships.

Two further examples of concepts that play a similarly deafening role are the concepts of culture and nation. Both Miller (2003, 17) and Kymlicka (2003, 18) define these concepts in

reference to distinct, relatively well-demarcated historical communities with close connections to a specific and definite territory. Problematically, the criteria used in these concepts create firm categories and seek to organize the world in a well-ordained manner. Yet, Indigenous nationhood was and is fundamentally of a different and more complex nature such that we are prevented from adequately understanding what Indigenous peoples claim about their political ontology and of fully grasping the diversity of political forms they embody and recognize.

Stark (2012, 122-123) explains that Indigenous nationhood did not rely on coercion and authority. Despite there being ways to make decisions, it was not assumed right to coerce others to act. Authority was more about persuasion than command. She also explains, with the help of a story, that nations are mutually marked when they enter into treaties. They are changed and their partners are changed in their identity. They are not insular entities. These two facts help us see that Indigenous nationhood is something more flexible and complex than the strict terms offered by rational political theory. Neither internally nor externally are Indigenous nations as uniform and demarcated as hoped by the rationalist concepts. This is even more problematic when considering the use of land. For Miller and Kymlicka, the attachment to a definite territory is essential. But, as Stark (2012, 122-123) explains, access to land was not exclusive and was governed through various alliances and treaties which created and extended a 'dense web of clans, kinship ties, and loyalties' between Indigenous nations, such that this diversity and complexity of political forms and relationships 'existed within nationhood, not as forces that opposed it', over *shared* territories. This complexity and flexibility of political organization was confounding for colonial officials who 'sought to apply Western constructions of nationhood' (Stark 2012, 128). I contend that this complexity and flexibility is as perplexing to rationalist political theory and that it operates the same imposition of Western constructions of nationhood,

but in doing so it becomes deaf to Indigenous peoples' own understanding of their political forms and relationships

Distorting Indigenous peoples' voices

The distortion of Indigenous voices is a form of cultural imperialism that refers to two distinct but related phenomena in which the voices of Indigenous peoples fail to convey the actual claims or views put forward. This happens either when their voices are wrongly interpreted, through a rationalist lens, or when Indigenous peoples modify and frame their claims so as to move their rationalist interlocutors.[13]

In the previous section, I mentioned how Indigenous peoples see themselves as having responsibilities to the rest of Creation. As Little Bear (2000, 78) explains: '[e]verything is more or less animate. […] If everything is animate, then everything has spirit and knowledge. If everything has spirit and knowledge, then all are like me. If all are like me, then all are my relations.' This understanding of Creation entails a deep grounding of Indigenous worldviews: '[t]ribal territory is important because Earth is our Mother (and this is not a metaphor: it is real). The Earth cannot be separated from the actual being of Indians. The Earth is where the continuous and/or repetitive process of creation occurs.' The 'actual being of Indians' cannot be separated from their relations, which are not abstract relations, but real grounded relations. These are core aspects of Indigenous worldviews; they support a way of being in the world and of interpreting and theorizing the world and politics. I mentioned previously how rationalism does not hear those voices and does not register the claims arising from these worldviews about the

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[13] See Rollo (2014, 228-229).

nature and the conduct of politics. One reason why it is deaf to those claims is that it distorts them by interpreting them as religious and cultural claims.

Recall that rationalism is optimistic that human reason has the power to apprehend the whole of reality. It sees reason as occupying an objective, external, point of view on nature and society. It assumes that there should be a single uniform and coherent scheme to apprehend reality and this scheme is a scientific one.[14] Discourses that affirm the existence of spirits, the interconnectedness of all things, or sources of knowledge other than reason, are not seen as alternative points of view on reality, but as forms of discourse to be apprehended and classified by reason. These forms of discourse are not in the same category as objective rational discourse. Indigenous worldviews are seen to be like religion and their associated claims are classified as animistic religious claims. They can thus be assessed and accommodated like any other religious claims. This distorts Indigenous voices in two ways: first, it forces Indigenous peoples to present the positions they derive from their worldviews as religious claims and second it downgrades a cosmological difference to a cultural/religious one and thereby subsumes it under the rationalist worldview.

Firstly, Indigenous peoples will often have to distort their own voices in order to be heard in public forums. This has to do with the pragmatics of discourse. When we engage in discourse, we often seek a certain outcome. In order to maximize the chances of achieving that outcome, we often frame our claims in ways that (we believe) maximize the chances of success. In the present case, Indigenous peoples have to frame their claims in ways that speak to the dominant rationalist western discourse and power holders. This is notably very present in legal litigation.

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[14] I note that Indigenous knowledge and science are not inconsistent. Elder Albert Marshall has discussed the principle of two-eyed seeing to direct the best use of the two forms of knowledge.

As Vermette (2009, 237, 240) explains: '[w]hen drafting claims, Aboriginal people must support their claim using the accepted precedents of the court. […] If a claim has foundation in the common law it will be more likely to succeed than if it is rooted in Aboriginal conceptions of the right.' And a bit later: 'Claims also need to be drafted in a way that the court will understand.' Indigenous peoples find themselves before legal and political forums where the rationalist Western worldview holds a hegemonic position. Claims grounded in their holistic worldviews will not register as such; they have to be framed following terms that are acknowledged from within a rationalist discourse. Framing those claims as religious claims offers a chance of success.

For instance, in Ktunaxa Nation *v*. British Columbia, the Ktunaxa Nation representatives appealed a previous court decision. They argued that their freedom of religion would be violated if a ski resort was built in an area they call Qat'muk. This area is, for them, the home of the Grizzly Bear Spirit and this spirit would be driven away by the construction of the ski resort. The Supreme Court of Canada recognized the religious belief of the Ktunaxa, but dismissed the case on the ground that 'the state's duty is to protect everyone's freedom to hold such beliefs and to manifest them in worship and practice or by teaching and dissemination', 'not to protect the object of beliefs or the spiritual focal point of worship'. What is of interest here is that the Ktunaxa nation had to frame its claim as one of freedom of religion. They could not as such argue that Qat'muk was the home of the Grizzly Bear Spirit and that it would be driven away. This claim does not warrant protection under a rationalist legal scheme since it is not grounded in any verifiable evidence or consideration deemed to have to be protected. The religious belief that the Grizzly Bear Spirit would be driven away might, however, warrant protection. As I interpret it, the Ktunaxa nation did not as such seek to protect its freedom of religion. What it sought was

to protect the home of the Grizzly Bear Spirit. But in order to be heard, they had to use the language of the Canadian legal system. This is a clear example of distortion and I contend that the same type of phenomenon is at play in political theory. In order to be heard, Indigenous peoples have to resort to the hegemonic rationalist discourse.

Secondly, by classifying Indigenous claims as religious or cultural claims, rationalism fails to appreciate the profound differences between the rationalist and Indigenous discourses. It distorts the Indigenous voices in hearing them as merely offering religious or cultural points of view, while they in fact offer alternative cosmological understandings of our relationship to Creation. They challenge the rationalist presumption of occupying an external and objective point of view to apprehend nature and society.

As Laugrand (2013, 219) explains, the modern rationalist worldview proffers a radical difference between humans and the natural world. Humans are of nature but they are not quite part of it. Nature is the environment in which we evolve and interact, but it is separate from us. We are rational beings and our reason gives us dominion over nature. This reason also makes us sources of claims and creators of values. It is thanks to reason that we perceive and attribute value to nature. Without rational beings to value nature, it would be axiologically void. The value attributed to nature is typically associated with what is useful for us. Nature is something to be exploited. Humans are the center of this universe; rendering this modern rationalist worldview anthropocentric.

In interpreting Indigenous claims from this anthropocentric worldview and in interpreting them as religious or cultural claims, rationalism does not recognize how Indigenous voices precisely question the underlying rationalist view of nature and question the separatedness of

humans and nature. Let us consider, for instance, how Coulthard (2014, 13) describes Indigenous

political struggles:

> the theory and practice of Indigenous anticolonialism […] is best
> understood as a struggle primarily inspired by and oriented around *the*
> *question of land* – a struggle not only *for* land in the material sense, but also
> deeply *informed* by what the land *as system of reciprocal relations and*
> *obligations* can teach us about living our lives in relation to one another and
> the natural world in nondominating and nonexploitative terms […]. I call
> this place-based foundation of Indigenous decolonial thought and practice
> *grounded normativity*.

This description is grounded in Indigenous worldviews, i.e. in the recognition of our

embeddedness in Nature and of our obligations to all of our relations. Indigenous claims are not

merely cultural claims and practices or religious beliefs within the overarching rational modern

view of nature. They are diametrically opposed to this view of nature. They are cosmological

claims offering alternative views and interpretations of reality.

Following Laugrand (2013), I quote from Viveiros De Castro (2006, 51-52) in order to

illustrate the extent to which categorizing Indigenous difference as merely religious or cultural

distorts the extent of the difference:

> Let us imagine the two branches (the two legs) of a compass: nature,
> culture. So that one may move, it is necessary that the other be kept in a
> fixed position. Let us imagine, therefore, the contemporary metaphysical
> vulgate—our multiculturalism on a background of mononaturalism, our
> epistemic democracy on a background of ontological monarchy—like the
> activity of fixating the branch corresponding to nature, while the one
> corresponding to culture draws a circle of points of view around this center
> that remains there, immobile, around which turns an infinitly diversified
> vision—like the circle is composed of an infinity of points—around the
> fixed axis of nature. At first sight, the Indians seem to be doing the reverse.
> It is the axis of culture that is fixed: there is only one culture and what vary

are the bodies that incorporate it, that give this culture diverse expressions, drawing the circle of infinite natures.[15]

What this illustrates is that Indigenous voices are not merely offering a distinct cultural or religious point of view on the background of a fixed nature that can be reduced to our needs, interests and wishes. To interpret their claims as merely points of view within the Western cosmology is to distort their voices. It is to keep the rationalist worldview constant and deny that it is being challenged. To adequately hear Indigenous peoples' voices, we need to appreciate that when they appeal to their grounded normativity they are also thereby challenging this rationalist worldview.

The third and final distortion concerns the structuring of political discourse and agency. As we saw, rationalism seeks perfection and uniformity and the right principles to organize political society. In doing so, it also provides normative principles to direct political conduct. For instance, it puts forward the importance of democratic governance, of the rule of law, of civil discourse, and so on, and it provides substantive accounts of those principles. In other words, it imposes a substantive theoretical framework within which political agency is allowable. This framework applies to the political agency and discourse of Indigenous peoples such that their claims are to be weighted in light of what is theoretically adequate. If they are not satisfied with the resolution, they will be held as vindictive, greedy, or irrational. Here, Indigenous voices are not self-authoritative. They are always heard, and thus distorted, through the filter of what rationalist political theory judges acceptable.

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[15] My translation.

This distorts the political discourse and political agency of Indigenous peoples in two significant ways. Firstly, it typically works to reinforce the status quo by imposing the use of normative concepts that support the political order wished for by rationalist political theory. Secondly, the imposition of such a theoretical framework also works to disqualify forms of political agency that challenge the normative order supported.

Indigenous theorists from, notably, Turtle Island and Aotearoa have discussed these two forms of distortion. The first form of distortion is explained, for instance, by Coulthard and Corntassel who criticise the politics of reconciliation and recognition because of its anti-subversive and anti-critical nature. Despite officially aiming at ensuring greater self-determination and dignity for Indigenous peoples, they argue that the terms of the politics of recognition risk reinforcing the dominance of the settler state. As Coutlhard (2008, 194-195) explains, in seeking recognition from colonial institutions like the state, Indigenous peoples will be lead to define themselves through the concepts recognized by the settler state. As Corntassel (2008) explains, in seeking the recognition of aboriginal rights, Indigenous peoples would also be tacitly recognizing the legitimacy of the state to extend them those rights. Similarly, Henderson (2002, 422) argues that the concept of equal citizenship has the same distortive effect: 'It represents the forgetting, denying, or trivializing of the treaty compact in exchange for life as a racial or ethnic minority, which has not been an effective instrument for protecting vital constitutional, cultural, or personal interests of Aboriginal peoples.' These theorists clearly show how apparently innocuous normative concepts like recognition, rights and equal citizenship can distort the claims of Indigenous peoples, devoid them of their critical import, and enlist them to the defense of the status quo.

Smith (2000, 211) illustrates the second form of distortion in eloquent terms. He explains how the framing of political agency along rationally acceptable lines focuses our attention on its allowable conduct as opposed to the substance of the contention. This prevents Indigenous voices from being adequately heard when they challenge the existing order since their political agency is disqualified and the political discourse is reoriented towards the right conduct.

> In recent years, Maori have penetrated the "politics of distraction" promulgated by dominant white non-Indigenous interests and have stopped feeling guilty about serving our own interests first. We have challenged the hegemonies that maintain the status quo of Pakeha dominance and Maori subordination; for example, the beliefs surrounding the need to preserve "good race relations," "democracy," and "social equality" have been exposed as ideologies that thwart Maori interests and, conversely, serve to entrench existing Pakeha privilege.

In this instance, rational political theory frames political discourse by putting the emphasis on democracy, good race relations and so on, but in doing so the actual issues are not being addressed and the legitimacy of the settler state is not questioned.

To summarize, rationalism in political theory distorts the voices of Indigenous peoples in failing to appreciate how the claims derived from their grounded normativity challenge the rationalist cosmological view that sees reason as an objective external observer of nature. It also distorts their voices in leading them to frame their claims as religious and cultural claims. Finally, it distorts their voices in defining the framework, both in terms of concepts and conduct, through which their political agency and claims must be assessed.

Conclusion: Political theorising and hearing people in their own voices

In explaining various ways in which rationalism in political theory both silences and distorts the voices of Indigenous peoples, I have shown that despite seeking justice and reconciliation, political theorists may adopt rationalist ways of thinking about politics that prevent them from

adequately pursuing epistemic justice. If rationalism is a source of epistemic violence, the question remains of how we should engage in political theorizing so as to avoid this form of oppression. In what remains, I explain two considerations that should be kept in mind when engaging in political theorizing in order to hear people in their own voices and recognize the full extent of their political agency. The first is that politics is constructed and the second is that political theory in embedded in politics.

Firstly, in saying that politics is constructed, I mean that a deity, natural law, or universal rationality do not determine the form and substance of politics. Politics is rather a practice. It is a convention that we learn to engage in.[16] It is entirely the result of human agency, and thus constructed. In being a convention, it is something that can be changed, revised, transformed and adapted. Politics takes a specific form in any given context and this form often takes the appearance of necessity. Yet, it is in fact contingent. The form and substance of politics can always be called into question. In saying this, I follow authors like Tully, who himself is inspired by Wittgenstein. Tully (1999, 170) explains this idea by referring to politics as a game, the rules of which can always be revised and questioned. This means that people can exercise their political agency in various ways so as to bring the rules of the game, the form of politics, under their control.

Secondly, in saying that political theory is embedded, I mean that it is not above actual political discourse. It is itself a form of political discourse. Correlatively, political actors are also themselves engaged in theorizing politics. Through their political conduct, they (can) negotiate, revise and resist those supposedly perfect theories. In doing so, they are not merely acting

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[16] See Oakeshott (1975).

irrationally or subjecting truth to power. They are engaging in concrete theorising by negotiating the terms of their governance.[17]

Whereas rationalism seeks the perfect theory to implement in a uniform manner over a political society, and whereas it sees allowable politics as taking place within the parameters it sets and following the concepts it defines—democracy, good racial relations, nations, cultures, reconciliation within state sovereignty, justice as fairness—seeing politics as a practice and seeing political theory as embedded in politics allow us to recognize that people exercise their political agency in ways that seek to transform those parameters and that put forward alternatives views. In working with those two considerations, political theory is more likely to hear those critical Indigenous voices without disqualifying them.

But in order to appreciate these two considerations fully, we need to revise a common assumption about the type of knowledge pursued by political theory. As Oakeshott (1962, 7-13) explains it, rationalism assumes that political theory seeks technical knowledge. This could be described as a complete theoretical and propositional account of politics. On that view, the right relationship, reconciliation, epistemic justice, and so on, would all be ideas to be fully understood and substantiated at the theoretical level. Afterwards, one would only need to read the right book or paper to know how to address those political issues. This form of knowledge does not account well, however, for a political theory that is both constructed and embedded.

This is better accounted for by the second form of knowledge discussed by Oakeshott, i.e. practical knowledge. This is a form of knowledge that manifests itself in use. Political

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[17] This supports an approach to political theory in line with the one advocated by Tully (1995, 2008).

knowledge is more like a form of skilful expertise that is accumulated through practice than something learned. That form of knowledge allows for the accumulated wisdom of the ages, but also for the value of stories, ceremonies, Elders, and so on. It allows political agency as a source of political knowledge such that it acknowledges that the just society is not something only thought about; it is something we also collectively build through practice.

To conclude, if we seek reconciliation in political theory, we need to truly hear people in their own voices, in all their various tones and expressions, recognize alternative worldviews and alternative understanding of politics and political conduct. In order to do so, some of our primary tasks as theorists should be to avoid peremptory theoretical discourses, notably about the reconciled society, and to criticize the various ways in which our supposedly inclusive discourses thwart the already present political agency and voices of Indigenous peoples.

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