

# Creolizing Theory in Conversation with Theorizing Race in the Americas

*Juliet Hooker*

**ABSTRACT:** This review essay situates Jane Anna Gordon's *Creolizing Political Theory* in light of methodological debates about the nature and role of "comparison." Gordon repurposes the concept of "creolization" as a means for political theory to grapple with heterogeneity and mixture, not as discrete sets of thinkers and traditions, but as co-constituting. Gordon's use of creolizing is then read alongside Hooker's concept of juxtaposition as an alternative to comparison.

**KEYWORDS:** comparison, creolization, juxtaposition, mixture, decolonization

Jane Anna Gordon's *Creolizing Political Theory* makes a powerful case for the unexpected insights generated by reading supposedly disparate texts alongside each other. Gordon explains that "creolizing political theory . . . involves conceptualizing the task of theorizing in such a way that we create conversations among thinkers and ideas that may at first appear incapable of having actually taken place" (Gordon 2014, 14). Gordon provides a case study of this approach to reading the history of political thought by reading Rousseau in relation to Fanon. As she observes, the fact that Rousseau and Fanon are viewed as an unlikely pairing is odd given their shared location as thinkers within the geographic and intellectual space of the Francophone empire who had similar theoretical concerns. In her view their shared intellectual preoccupation was a desire to "challenge the ways that reason had been used to advance the singularity of particular models of desirable political arrangements and ways of being human" (63). In a certain sense, the only reason it would seem unusual

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to read Fanon and Rousseau together is the colonial and Eurocentric legacies that mark one as a canonical European thinker and the other as a Third-World thinker whose contributions to Western political thought are more contested.

It is precisely this approach to political theorizing that Gordon challenges in this book. Her aim is to affirm the unexpected insights that can emerge when we do not reify the usual canonical and disciplinary divisions and approach the task of “comparison” differently. Gordon conceives her methodological intervention as a repurposing of the concept of “creolization.” She suggests that “to creolize political theory then is to grapple with heterogeneity and mixture not as discrete pockets of a fractured world but as co-constituting and co-situating in ways that we are obligated to try to understand and reflect. . . .” (197–198). In addition to reading a wider variety of texts and thinkers, a key element of creolization as method would therefore be to resist the effects of academic hyper-specialization and fidelity to disciplinary boundaries.

Gordon’s project is akin in many ways to the methodological approach I advocate in *Theorizing Race in the Americas* (Hooker 2017). There, I propose the concept of juxtaposition as an alternative to comparison. Juxtaposition, I argue, avoids the ranking impulse and illusion of coherence/distinctness of the units of analysis that inhere in comparison. Further, juxtaposition allows us to put seemingly disparate texts and thinkers in conversation. Specifically, *Theorizing Race* places Latin American and African-American thinkers from the U.S. within a shared hemispheric frame in order to trace how racial thought in both regions was developed in conversation with “the other” America, not as two distinct and disparate racial paradigms, as they have often been imagined to be. It shows how ideas traveled across the hemisphere, and how thinkers in different locations engaged in processes of creative appropriation and borrowing that repurposed “imported” ideas in service of local political projects and debates. More broadly, I argue that political theorists would do well to engage in contextual readings that pay attention to the specific historical and political contexts in which ideas and texts have been formulated in order to interrogate how the boundaries between philosophical traditions are produced as contingent products of varying political and intellectual projects.

Gordon and I are thus fully in agreement that reading disparate figures and texts together makes for better, more capacious political theory. Interestingly, while we both find the laudable attention to non-European texts and thinkers enabled by the emergence of comparative political theory to be an encouraging and important development, neither of us chose to frame our interventions under this rubric. This is in part because of shared concerns that as practiced thus far comparative political theory has had a tendency to reify

certain dominant axes of comparison (between “Western” or European thinkers and “non-Western” or non-European ones), and that thinkers from certain traditions (Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean) remain underrepresented among those studied. As Gordon aptly observes, the problem with this disparity is that: “it is no coincidence . . . that those people, groups, and nations that are absent from comparative intercivilizational conversation are precisely those that occupy what Enrique Dussel has called ‘modernity’s underside’ and, in turn, that the readiest interlocutors are those writing and thinking within empires, both those that are emergent and consolidating and those in periods of decay” (Gordon 2014, 216). One of the key questions for those seeking to unsettle and rupture political theory’s inherited assumptions about who counts as a thinker and about where theory is produced is how to broaden the contours of the field without reifying existing intellectual and geographic hierarchies. It thus matters enormously what tools we employ to pursue this aim.

As a result, despite significant lines of convergence, there are some important differences between our approaches. Most centrally, I have qualms about adopting the language of “creolization” to describe and orient this type of methodological intervention in political theory, as suggestive as I think Gordon’s argument in favor of the term is. Gordon is certainly aware of the limits of creolization. She recognizes, for example, that creolization “is incoherent and easily manipulated with destructive consequences when we speak of societies more generally. Rather than making such a prescriptive move, I instead suggest more modestly that using creolization as a lens will prove highly useful” (Gordon 2014, 169). Yet, as a concept, creolization gives normative weight to mixture. It is not clear that we can assume *a priori* that political or philosophical projects defined by or oriented to mixture are necessarily normatively superior to others, however. Consider, for example, the uses to which conceptions of *mestizaje* have been put in Latin America, where they have served to both open and foreclose avenues for political participation and philosophical intervention by Black and Indigenous peoples at different moments. Thus, the normative appeal/potential of creolizing projects will depend on the context in which they are being adopted. In Latin America, where mixture has been idealized and ossified in certain national ideologies, creolization will hardly rupture or challenge existing power relations or intellectual hierarchies.

Gordon recognizes this concern when she observes that the prescriptive account of creolization in the work of Caribbean thinkers and writers such as Édouard Glissant and others “moves between a highly normative ideal after which we might strive and suggesting that it has already been rigorously realized in the Caribbean past, in models that should be adopted and are already

surfacing around the globe” (Gordon, 2014: 181). In her view such dangers can be avoided by recognizing that creolization is not an end in itself, but rather “the *inevitable* consequence of together diagnosing a shared world for the sake of generating more legitimate alternatives” (184, emphasis mine). But this caveat that creolization is merely a method and not an aim in itself does not resolve the problem of the normative value being attached to mixture. Moreover, the claim that creolization is the “inevitable” consequence of egalitarian political/philosophical projects begs the question of whether creolization is being conceived as a method or (more crucially) as a politics.

Gordon acknowledges creolization’s baggage, but she argues that it nevertheless offers a superior model for understanding the workings of culture and therefore of reality. She recognizes that creolization is a “concept that emerges from the violent displacement of plantation societies of early global modernity” (Gordon 2014, 11). Nevertheless, *Creolizing Political Theory* itself does not always successfully avoid creolization’s tendency to elide power relations. According to Gordon, “creolization offers a model of how it is that people have constructed collective worlds out of necessity” (196). If a process that was initiated and shaped by enslavement, conquest, and dispossession is to serve as a model for how shared worlds are built, however, then the question is how to simultaneously show co-constructedness while also paying equal attention to the power disparities—that is, empire, genocide, and enslavement—that shaped the specific historical contexts in which creolized thinkers and spaces emerged. Consider, for example, Rousseau’s famous opening line in the *Social Contract* that “man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains,” which is discussed in Gordon’s book. The *Social Contract*, of course, is a text devoted to considering the kinds of political communities most compatible with maximizing the “natural” freedom of individuals. In my view this statement would need to be situated by grappling with the fact that it was initially published in 1762, during the high point of the European-led transatlantic slave trade in the eighteenth century, and thus with what it meant to use slavery as a metaphor for lack of political rights without also paying attention to the existence of pervasive chattel slavery at the time. This is the kind of work creolization would have to do in order to function as Gordon would like it to.

Another important question is the extent to which creolization and epistemological decolonization map on to each other. *Creolizing Political Theory*, for example, reveals a much more interesting Rousseau by reading him alongside Fanon. Gordon’s creolized Rousseau is most interesting when she highlights his engagement with the rest of the non-European world, and the upshot of the concurrent reading of Rousseau and Fanon seems to be that Fanon achieved

what Rousseau could not because of his more thoroughly creolized method and location (93–94). This suggests that one of the possible outcomes of creolization as a method would be to transform the canon of political theory and to allow more accurate readings of canonical figures. Indeed, at various points Gordon suggests that creolization's theoretical utility is derived in part from the fact that historically, it has been illicit and provoked “consternation” or “misgivings” (Gordon 2014, 179, 187). It is much less clear what is illuminated about Fanon's thought by reading him alongside Rousseau, however, which raises the question of what creolization would reveal about thinkers from subaltern traditions who are already self-consciously engaged in creolization and whose location is already understood as thoroughly creolized.

In spite of my qualms about the limits of creolization as a conceptual tool, Gordon's work makes a powerful case for why political theorists need to read differently rather than simply read more broadly. Given my own disciplinary location I have emphasized the book's important contributions to the project of decolonizing political theory in which many of us are fellow travelers, but the challenge it poses extends beyond political science. *Creolizing Political Theory* is a passionate call for a historically informed praxis of inter-disciplinarity, or to use Gordon's preferred term, for creolizing disciplines and the production of theory more broadly. I have learned much from engaging with this book, as I am certain others will.

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