

EDITORIAL

WAS KANT WRONG?

Some Republican Reflections on War and Peace

Never since the Second World War has war been so popular as it is now. After three, at least apparently successful military show-downs (Kosovo/Serbia, Afghanistan, and Iraq) the leaders of the world are, again, convinced that wars are useful, and that they can be won. We have returned to the world of von Clausewitz: war is not an uncontrollable process – as Tolstoy thought – it is, again, seen as “continuation of politics by other means”.

If war is a political process, it should be a legitimate subject of political theory. And so should be peace. What does our political theory tell us about the questions of peace and war? Not much. The history of the subject during the last 2500 years consists of works that are mainly historical, jurisprudential, or strategic, plus a series of short comments and footnotes in the works mainly devoted to the “normal” politics. With a slight exaggeration, there exists only one work in the Western canon that is simultaneously (a) political theory proper, (b) written by a classic author of the first rate, (c) theoretically innovative, and (d) exclusively owed to the questions of war and peace. That work is, of course, Kant’s *Zum Ewigen Frieden*.¹

Kant’s argument is a deceptively simple one. A republic is, for him, a State in which the content of important political decisions is

dependent on the will of its citizens. But ordinary citizens do not want war; here, moral and egoistic motives always converge. Hence, in a world of republics, there will be no war. Kant's short work has become a symbol of political movements and of schools of thought. Before and after the First World War, Kant's essay inspired both the academic study of International Relations – which for first time emerged as an independent discipline – and practical politics, especially President Wilson's peace programme and the establishment of the League of Nations.² (Bruns) Arguably, it has played a similar role in the recent years.

Partly because of its status as a symbol, *Perpetual Peace* has always been criticized from different angles. Classical realists, from Friedrich von Gentz and Hegel onwards, have seen Kant's theory as a blueprint for an unfeasible utopia, inconsistent with the basic nature of the State and of human beings. Modern "neorealists", who see international conflicts as inescapable consequences of the structural properties of the international system cannot accept Kant's idea that an internal transformation of the states could change the nature of their external relations. For radicals and Marxists, Kant's reliance on bourgeois republicanism and the "commercial spirit" are often seen as pieces of an apologetic ideology of capitalism.

However, Kant's book may equally be a disappointment for its internationalistically minded readers. Although Kant sketches a plan for a global "federation", and gives some very detailed instructions for its workings, his proposal does not contain any idea of *international institutions*. In his "federation" there is no international authoritative body comparable to those "senates" or "councils" imagined by many of his predecessors (like abbé de Saint-Pierre or Rousseau) and by almost all of his followers. Most importantly, In Kant's plan, there is no room for *coercive* institutions: no international court, no international enforcing mechanisms, not even a collective system of defence like the one established by the League of Nations. The sovereign rights of the member states are, at least *de jure*, left intact. Because almost all internationalists have seen strong institutions as a necessary condition for the permanent peace, it is no wonder that many internationalist readers of Kant's essay insisted that Kant *must* have held the idea that international institutions were necessary. How could he otherwise use the term "federation" at all?³

Several commentators have conclusively shown that Kant did not suppose his “federation” to have any international institutions.⁴ At least he did not give them any role in the process that would lead to a global peace. After these clarifications, one could not sincerely defend the interpretation that Kant *actually* wanted to establish some kind of world government. One could, however, still claim that from his own point of view, he *should* have recommended it.⁵ *Prima facie*, this sounds plausible. Kant agreed with Hobbes that coercion was the essence of the state. A legally unregulated state of nature was a state of permanent conflict, and at the individual level it could be terminated only by establishing a system based on authoritative coercion. According to him, the States were in a legally unregulated state, and he rejected both the decentralized legal solution of the classical International Law, and the realist solution, based on the balance of power. How could he, then, refuse to accept the only solution that seemed to remain, the one based on international coercive institutions?

For Kant, a republican government – which was a necessary condition for the legitimacy of any State – did not mean an identity between the rulers and the ruled. Instead, his republicanism meant a complex system of institutional mediations between the will of the citizens and the actual application of law. All these institutional elements were necessary for the solution of the problem. They included (1) representative institutions, (2) the separation of powers, (3) a *Rechtsstaat*, or the rule of law, and, last but not least, (4) a free and enlightened public opinion. Now, an international organization with coercive powers would constitute a State, however minimal this World-State might be. Hence, it could be made legitimate for its subjects through republican institutions only. What would that mean in practice? What would, for example, be the appropriate way to realize the principle of citizens’ representation in a world state? Is it possible to have a world-wide public opinion which could exercise critical control over that world state? Here, the recent discussion on the institutions of the European Union is illuminative. Of course, the problems faced by an organization covering only a half of Europe, with just 20-25 member states, and without dramatic economic inequalities or cultural tensions, are small compared to the problems of a global state. Nevertheless, it seems clear that the European

Union in its present form does *not* satisfy the republican principles. Its representative institutions and its internal separation of powers are not sufficiently developed, nor is there any working, all-European public opinion. Consequently, its decisions do not adequately reflect the reasoned will of its citizens. Could these problems be solved at the global level? If they cannot, a coercive global state cannot made be as legitimate, however pacifying its effects might be.

The second coming of *Zum Evigen Frieden* was initiated by the seminal essays of Michael W. Doyle in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* (1983).⁶ For the second time in history, Kant's short and somewhat incomplete treatise created a new research programme for the academic studies of international relations. And again, it has had certain influence on practical politics, most notably in the politics of the Clinton regime in the United States. Unlike the old Idealist tradition which flourished before and after the First World War, the new Kantian paradigm is able to generate empirically testable hypotheses. The empirical observation which made by Doyle and precised and modified by others, is that there has been almost no wars between "liberal democracies" during the last two hundred years. This seems to give empirical support for Kant's conjecture.

I shall not discuss the reliability of this evidence, for the real problem lies elsewhere. Even if liberal democracies have not fought with each others, they have fought numerous wars against non-democracies during the last two hundred years. Some of them have been defensive wars, and justifiable from Kant's point of view. However, since the Second World War, the United Kingdom, the USA and France have also been involved in numerous wars and conflicts which cannot possibly be justified in terms of self-defence. Consider the US involvement in Vietnam. Wasn't it a clear counterexample to Kant's thesis that republics are peaceful by their nature?

Here we have to draw the distinction between *Kant's thesis* and the thesis put forth by the Neo-Kantian political scientists. Those who have tried to test Kant's conjecture have unproblematically identified Kant's "republics" with modern liberal democracies. But would Kant himself accept that equation? Since the 19th century, Kant's first three conditions, the separation of powers (1), representative institutions (2), and the rule of law (3) have been realized in those states charaterized as "liberal democracies" by modern political sci-

entists. But the fourth condition, the existence of an *enlightened public opinion* is a more complex one. The problem is that Kant's republic was an *ideal*; empirical states may approximate it more or less closely. In a footnote in *Der Streit der Fakultäten*, Kant formulates an extremely strict "test" for the republican character of constitutions:

What is an *absolute* monarch? He is one at whose command war at once begins when he says it shall do so. And conversely, what is a *limited* monarch? He is one who must ask the people whether or not there is to be a war, and if the people say that there will be no war, then there will be none. For war is a condition in which *all* the powers of the state must be at the head of state's disposal.

Now the monarch of Great Britain has waged numerous wars without asking the people's consent. This king is therefore an absolute monarch, although he should not be so according to the constitution. But he can always bypass the latter, since he can always be assured, by controlling the various powers of the state, that the people's representatives will agree with him; for he has the authority to award all offices and dignities. This corrupt system, however, must naturally be given no publicity if it is to succeed.

Thus, what Kant is after is not a juristic definition of a "republic" but a real, political definition. A Kantian answer to the criticism would be that the warlike politics of the modern republics is partly due to the *insufficiently republican* nature of the states. The unrepublican practices which prevailed in foreign policy, and the insufficiently developed and sometimes manipulated public opinion made wars possible. In modern times, Robert MacNamara's recent account on the American involvement in the Vietnam war provides illuminative examples of this⁷. First, MacNamara shows that the intervention was clearly supported by the American public opinion in the early sixties; but at the same time, he makes clear that the conflict was perceived to take place between democratic and totalitarian principles. Second, while President Johnson got the Congress' blessing to the further deployment of forces, the Congress never made a decision on waging a real war. In Vietnam, as in several cases before and after, the US President acted like the King of England in Kant's example: he actively produced the required consent for a military interven-

tion. (A striking example of this is the crucial resolution of the Congress concerning the Tonkin incident in the 7th August 1964.) Third, it was the American public opinion which forced the President finally to withdraw.

Would the present situation provide a more convincing counter-example to Kant's "republican peace" -thesis? Or could it be analysed in the same way, as an example how the leaders of the world may manipulate the public opinion by violating the Kantian principle of sincerity? I shall leave the judgment to the readers.

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This is the present Editor-in-Chief's last issue of the *Yearbook*. I want to express my gratitude to all the co-editors. The new Editor will follow his/her own guidelines; the *Yearbook*, however, shall continue as an interdisciplinary journal, addressed to all who are interested in the theoretical aspects of politics.

Notes

- 1 Immanuel Kant, *Kant's Political Writings*. Ed. Hans Reiss. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997; Immanuel Kant, *Schriften zur Anthropologie, Gesichtsphilosophie, Politik und Pädagogik 1. Werkausgabe XI*. Ed. W. Weischedel. Suhrkamp Frankfurt am Main, 1978.
- 2 Tomas Bruns, *Kant et l'Europe*. Universität des Saarlandes, 1973.
- 3 This mistake appears e. g. in otherwise excellent books of C.J. Friedrich and J. G. Murphy. See Carl J. Friedrich, *Inevitable Peace*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.), 1948; J. G. Murphy, *Kant: The Philosophy of Right*. Macmillan, London, 1970, pp. 147-8.
- 4 W. B. Gallie, *Philosophers of Peace and War*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1978, 8-36; F. H. Hinsley, *Power and the Pursuit of Peace*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1978, 62-80; Howard Williams, *Kant's Political Philosophy*. Blackwell, Oxford, 1983.
- 5 Thomas L. Carson, 'Perpetual Peace: What Kant Should have Said'. *Social Theory and Practice* 14 (1988), 173-214. Jürgen Habermas, 'Kants Idee des Ewigen Friedens -aus dem historischen Abstand von 200 Jahren'. *Kritische Justiz* 28 (1995), 293-319; Otfried Höffe, *Vernunft und Recht*:

Bausteine zu einem interkulturel-len Rechtdiskurs. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1996.

- 6 Michael W. Doyle, 'Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs. Parts 1 & 2'. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 12 (1983), 205-235 and 323-353; Michael W. Doyle, 'Liberalism and International Relations'. In . R. Beinar and W.J. Booth (eds.) *Kant and Political Philosophy. The Contemporary Legacy*. Yale University Press, New Haven, 1993, pp. 173-203.
- 7 Robert MacNamara. *In Retrospect. The tragedy and lessons of Vietnam*. Vintage Books, New York, 1995.