

# Book Review: Kant's Politics in Context by Reidar Maliks

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**Kant's Politics in Context. Reidar Maliks. Oxford University Press. 2014.**

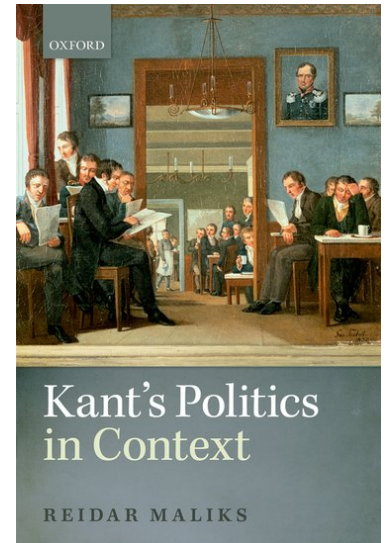
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For many, Kant appears to be a cerebrally distant figure – intimidating to tackle at best, completely impenetrable at worst. Others simply dismiss the modern relevance of the works of an eighteenth century scholar who reputedly never strayed more than seventy miles from Königsberg, particularly in an age where the very notion of objective moral standards is so far removed from popular discourse. Reidar Maliks' contextualisation of Kant's political writings goes a long way to help to address these concerns, successfully communicating the central ideas contained within Kant's work in an accessible and succinct manner without extensive need for prior familiarity with his writings.

The defining political event of Kant's lifetime was undoubtedly the French Revolution of 1789, and Maliks regularly makes reference to the direct impact which this trauma had on contemporary philosophy across Europe. Helpfully however, he begins his book with a small section on Kant's pre-1789 writings, with the objective of demonstrating the extent to which Kant's work evolved and was shaped by the events unfolding on the other side of the continent. For Maliks, the locus of almost all these works which made reference to political matters was individual morality; a free public sphere and a constitution which secured individual rights were important in that they allowed individuals to fully develop their moral capacities. The state was therefore important as a vehicle which allowed individuals to rationalise their potential as moral beings.

Maliks then locates Kant within a broader debate taking place in late eighteenth century German philosophy on the nature of the state. One school, identified as 'Rationalist Defenders of Absolutism', saw the purpose of the state to enforce the natural law with regards to what makes citizens and their conditions more perfect. These were polarised against 'Traditionalists', who saw the state's legitimacy as founded solely on small units whose organisation was grounded in a multi-generational development. Kant, by contrast, believed that social institutions must be morally justified by reason – conventional practice and experience cannot legitimise them, as these attributes render them morally subjective. A morally valid constitution should therefore provide the greatest possible freedom under laws which allow for reciprocal freedom.

It is with this summary in mind that Maliks then turns to discussing more focussed areas of Kant's politics with reference to both the aftermath of the French Revolution, but also in light of the large amount of contemporaneous secondary writing which Kant's work generated – both from his followers and his critics – through its regular appearances in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*. He divides his work into the headings of 'Freedom and Equality', 'Political Rights', 'Resistance and Revolution' and 'War and Peace'. Whilst this subdivision leads at times to some repetition of contextual considerations which Maliks believes are relevant when reading Kant's work, they are still a useful framework for discussion. The translation of Kant's ideas into more recognisable and accessible terminology from the perspective of a modern reader is an incredibly useful reading tool, particularly for readers who may be less familiar with, or completely new to, Kant's writing.



Of particular interest is the recurrent discussion of Kant's views on universal suffrage. Given the importance he places on the primacy of the individual and their moral development as a participant in society, one may expect him to have welcomed the steps taken by the radically egalitarian Jacobins under Robespierre to introduce universal suffrage to all male citizens over the age of 21. Indeed, many of Kant's most radical followers did see this as a step towards a political realisation of Kantian equality – Kant himself, however, did not. He instead sympathised with the early revolutionary writings of Abbé Sieyès. Only property owning men could be said to be truly free, as – unlike married women or labourers – they were not dependent on the whim of another (such as a husband or master) for their continued livelihood. For Sieyès, those who were dependant on another would be liable to use their vote to further the interests of their husband or master rather than their own.

That Kant was sympathetic to this view, for Maliks, is an issue of prudence. As Robespierre's increasingly idealistic France descended into the *Terror*, radical egalitarian principles were increasingly discredited throughout the rest of Europe. As such, Kant became concerned that democracy may too easily descend into base majoritarianism. Democracy should therefore not be a universal goal; rather, a just constitution should concern itself with the pursuit of republicanism – defined as the separation of Legislative and Executive branches of government. This would avoid the dangers of authoritarianism, and also allow for the flourishing of a market economy – this in turn would provide the circumstances necessary for those who are initially denied the vote to acquire the requisite independence through hard work and prudence. Equality of freedom for citizens therefore is prioritised over formal democratic equality in order to ensure that votes are able to be independently cast, so long as circumstances exist through which suffrage can be earned.

Even were we to disregard that this republicanism would still deny the vote to women regardless of their marital status or financial independence, something Maliks ascribes to Kant's personal prejudices, this compromise may still be seen by some as inconsistent with Kant's continued emphasis on equality and reciprocity as vital for moral development of the individual. But this is where Maliks' work finds its value. By placing Kant in a historical context, we are able to see the empirical struggles he faced on a daily basis when formulating his ideas. We are offered a glimpse of Kant as a man as opposed to a name on a dense moral treatise; his loyalties to the Prussian state, his concern at France's descent into anarchy in the face of unbridled idealism and his continued engagement with his contemporaries. This humanisation of Kant serves to make him more accessible, and demonstrates that – despite his somewhat eccentric lifestyle – the concerns which motivated him are ones which we all share today.

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