

How is it possible to demystify the political Kant?

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Pauline Kleingeld, *Kant and Cosmopolitanism. The Philosophical Ideal of World Citizenship*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 215 p.

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Since old times, posterity has developed an almost natural tendency to build up mythologies around the great spirits. One such a mythology consists in the eternal academic attempt to reveal consistencies between the present facts, theories, events and a great spirit which in the past proved himself a visionary one. Moreover, there is an overwhelming amount of writings in social and humanist studies which put into light the visionary thinking of a philosopher or scientist by connecting it with nowadays ideas, theories, or concepts (even if that liaison is not always so obvious). For example, this kind of judgement can comprise Popper's idea that somehow Plato and his political project might be guilty for the twentieth century's "closed society", the totalitarian one (Popper 1971). Usually, studies like Popper's (and certainly the list is extremely long) prefer to bounce through history instead of situating that spirit in his contemporary times. Certainly, there are also noteworthy exceptions among which Pauline Kleingeld's most recent book, *Kant and Cosmopolitanism. The Philosophical Ideal of World Citizenship*.

Professor at the University of Groningen, Netherlands, Ms. Kleingeld is known for editing in 2006 Immanuel Kant's *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History* at Yale University Press and her numerous articles on Kant's political philosophy published in academic

journals like “European Journal of Philosophy”, “The Philosophical Quarterly”, “Philosophy and Public Affairs” and so on. With *Kant and cosmopolitanism*, published in 2012 at Cambridge University Press, she seems to have reached the highest pitch regarding the political Kant. Ms. Kleingeld’s struggle consists in revealing a different Kant from the philosophical one in the context in which his philosophical reputation out-rivals his political one. The second, and perhaps the most relevant implication of her book, supposes Kant’s demystification by placing him in the context of his contemporary world and by clarifying some interpretations on his political understanding. By this, she grants two favours: first to the philosophers who, following Arendt’s advice in *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, (1992, 7), usually *prennent à la légèrè* Kant’s politics; and second to those political scholars who misinterpret Kant at such a level that, by taking them seriously, someone might think that the Prussian philosopher was a lunatic.

Formally organized in seven chapters, introduction and references, the two hundred and fifteen pages are focused on the problem of cosmopolitanism and citizenship in the Kantian political writings. The first six chapters relate Kant and other thinkers of his time on matters like moral cosmopolitanism, patriotism, global peace, cosmopolitan right, race, culture, freedom of international trade and cosmopolitan community, while the last one places Kant in the context of the twentieth century political thought.

The first three chapters follow the pattern of Kant’s own project as developed in *Toward Perpetual Peace* and *Metaphysics of Morals*, in which constitutional, international and cosmopolitan rights must necessarily coexist in order to install perpetual peace. Kleingeld recognizes that she concentrated on his post 1790s writings, when all these three political levels or types of law have already been announced. The strategy of organizing her book in such a manner is due to the fact that he embraced cosmopolitan after giving up to racialism. From that multiple personae, Kleingeld selects the cosmopolitan, liberal Kant in contrast with the “dark” previous one.

As I already mentioned, Kleingeld creates several *mises en scène* where Kant and other thinkers (for each chapter another one) have hypothetical dialogues. In the first one, Kleingeld assumes that Kant and Wieland both developed cosmopolitan theories, but on different fundamentals. On one hand, Wieland's theory is an elitist one, by stating that being a cosmopolitan citizen represents the privilege of the sage human being. By contrast, the foolish one can only be a world inhabitant. He cannot fulfill his moral duty to promote perfection, regardless political or territorial affiliation. On the other hand, Kant's perspective on cosmopolitanism is egalitarian because he assumes that all rational beings have the ability to discern good and bad, based on categorical imperatives. Wieland and Kant believe that the citizen of the world is not a rootless person, in a Cynic way, but a person with strong affinities with his territory, its inhabitants and its social community, therefore a Stoic citizen.

For Kant, the cosmopolitan citizen is not necessarily the one who travels or the one who does not have a country, who is not linked to a certain territory through nationality or patriotism. On the contrary, "cosmopolitanism is an attitude taken up in acting: an attitude of recognition, openness, interest, beneficence and concern toward other individuals, cultures and peoples as members of one global community. One need not travel at all to merit the designation of being a citizen of the world." (Kleingeld 2012, 1) Kant himself is the proof that one must not necessarily travel or move from its own city to be a cosmopolitan spirit. In this respect, Kleingeld's intention is to prove that Kant's political views are in accordance with his life style and with his understanding of the world or with his own place in the cosmopolitan community. In other words, Kant not only sympathizes with the idea of a cosmopolitan citizenship, but he thinks and acts as a cosmopolitan citizen.

A second hypothetic dialogue presents Kant and Cloots on global peace. Cloots provides a "paternalistic world republic" where freedom of peoples should be brought by force, with France as the state which should unconditionally free the citizens from the tyrannical governments. Against the idea of a state of states, Kant suggests that they should freely gather a

league without dissolving themselves as autonomous agents, on the model of the republic which should recognize and respect the freedom of its citizens.

As for the third dialogue, the one between Kant and Forster, Kleingeld suggests it might have really existed and that, as a consequence of their intellectual correspondence in 1787-1788, Kant renounced to the defense of the “white supremacist racial hierarchy” (theory sustained in several writings before 1790). In his writings until 1790s, he defended racial hierarchy to which he gave up later. In *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Perspective* published in 1784, Kant sustained that Europe would be the legislator of the world (Kleingeld 2012, 97). Even if Kleingeld proclaims that this a temporary statement related to his racial thoughts, Kant had that idea in mind when he wrote *Toward Perpetual Peace*. By this, I think that Kant never renounced Eurocentrism, but instead he moved it from a racial superiority context to a political superiority one. As his model of just state is the republican one and as the republican state was active only in (some parts of) Europe, it would be a plausible idea that the beginning of a league of nations should wear a European mark. Taking into account his antecedents and knowing his strong connections with the political news of his time, I cannot understand Kant as an innocent thinker who proposed the project of perpetual peace without having in mind a *de facto* starting point (even if he refuses to mention it explicitly).

By militating for cultural diversity due to climate, social-economical and historical influences, Foster tried to reveal to the self-sufficient European intellectuals that cultural heritage of the entire world deserved appreciation and consideration. He edited and translated old Indian writings which have been received with much enthusiasm. It seems that at first Kant did not pay too much attention to Forster’s critiques to his racism. Nevertheless, the fact that, starting with *Toward Perpetual Peace*, Kant radically modified his understanding on diversity, differences between peoples might suggest that Forster succeeded in convincing him of his previous errors.

The fourth dialogue having as actors Kant and Hegewisch treats the freedom of international trade. Known for

introducing the idea of free-market cosmopolitanism, Hegewisch proclaims that states should only preserve and recognize the freedom of peoples. Global free trade represents the only way to empowering all states economies and the solution to inequalities between peoples. Based on extrapolation and subtext reading, Kleingeld pull out of Kant's cosmopolitan right a hypothetic theory on international trade. In fact she imagines what Kant would have said on such matters. She suggests that for him the just trade might seem more important than free trade and that states must recognize the freedom of peoples, without neglecting their social-economic problems.

In the latest scene, Kant and Novalis are put face to face on the matter of cosmopolitan community. Novalis provides a personal understanding of the community of peoples, based on love and faith, following the organic family model. Kant, on the contrary, "gambles" on the human predisposition to act morally, to cultivate the care for the other, the openness toward the other, the use of reason under the moral law. Moreover, his expectations regard the fact of putting cosmopolitanism into practice. The creation of the cosmopolitan community is not only a moral matter, but a practical, educational one. By using the tools provided by the Enlightenment, children can be cultivated in order to become moral agents and to ensure the moral progress of humankind.

An interesting aspect of the book consists in revealing a different Kant from the one we are used to. More precisely, regarding the political and juridical matters, Kleingeld unwraps a capricious, unclear, even inconsistent Kant. He is presented as changing his mind on subjects such as the race, the world government, the good will of people able to generate perpetual peace. This idea is announced from the very beginning of the book ("[...] they [the chapters] show that Kant changed his theory radically during the mid-1790s, much more radically than has been recognized to date" (Kleingeld 2012, 5), but it is retook over and over on topics specific to Kant's political views (Kleingeld 2012, 66, 94-95, 111, 113, 135, 164, 178, 180-181).

The book ends with a chapter dedicated to contemporary perspectives on Kantian cosmopolitanism. Kleingeld's attempt

is to reflect the discrepancies between Rawls and Habermas and their affiliation to the Kantian political philosophy. Without doubting the scientific quality and the pertinence of the arguments, this last part seems not to fit in the whole edifice of the book. I am afraid that Kleingeld's good intention to situate Kant in the current debates has neither rhyme nor reason. In my opinion, this chapter should be either missing or a different book. As I initially mentioned, the problem with the political Kant is not his current cut, but his misuse. The number of works revealing him as a visionary and insular thinker in regard to what is internationally and politically available nowadays is huge. Furthermore, the anachronistic approach has become the darling method of paying respects to a great mind. As a consequence, it was not necessary for her to beat over an old ground. Nevertheless (and ignoring the last chapter), Kleingeld's approach is not only rare, but praiseworthy because she situated Kant in his own time and proved that his thoughts are result of a certain emulation of an époque. By contextualizing him, she does not derogate him from his merits, but she deals out justice to other (or not so known) thinkers. And this, in my view, is nothing more than a dewy demystification of Kant's political thought.

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