



Kant and the Spectre of War

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Abstract. The aim of this paper is to arouse suspicion about the latent meaning and scope of Kant’s essay *Towards a perpetual peace*, regarding his idea of an abstract equality, which can begin to annul *individual* men, different from each other (each differing even from each other, within each other), in the name of an imaginary Man *kath'exochén*: a Free Being, Equal, Subject to the Law. Subject, of course, to a Law that he repeats and recites over and over again: Freedom, Equality, Subjection.

Keywords. peace; war; equality; Kant

Pro captu lectoris habent sua fata libelli
Terentianus Maurus

Who could reject the apothegm proposed as a *motto*, when it comes to *Towards Perpetual Peace*, the Kantian opusculum of 1795? In spite of capitalism and imperialism, in spite of world wars, in spite of the so-called Cold War with its balance of terror and, worse, its bloody renewal in the camps of Ukraine; in spite – and going to the other extreme – of genocides, once tribal and now exercised by a – let us say – theocratically governed democracy; despite all this, we

tell ourselves and repeat to ourselves, like a mantra, that the coercive power, the *Gewalt* concentrated in this text must be formidable, since it has been able to resist and even overcome, overbearing, the very hard trials of two hundred and thirty years of villainy and atrocities¹.

On the other hand, the important thing – it seems – is not whether or not Kant is up to the times, or whether the times are up to Kant (as if it were a matter of bloc politics), but whether we can apply the *heuristic* idea of *common* – and even *communal* – reason in the Kantian sense of public and free debate, overthrowing all sacredness and all majesty (thus also and above all philosophical texts in which it, *reason*, is presented as the guarantor of all truth), in order to prevent the *transcendental* idea of reason from becoming an infallible and valid supreme tribunal for all people, all places and all times.

The problem is that both ideas of “reason” – as free debate and as supreme court – coexist in Kant and make it difficult for us to have a mutually beneficial dialogue with his texts. For if it is true that *habent sua fata libelli*, it is even more true that the full sentence (by Terentianus Maurus, 2nd century AD) reads: *pro captu lectoris habent sua fata libelli*. If we were to keep only the last part (the well-known part), we would have the content, the timeless meaning of the book that decides its historical fate. On the other hand, the first part of the sentence *relativises* this idea, in accordance with the hermeneutics of reception. So the adage would go something like this: “As books are grasped by the reader, so will be their fate”. It will be necessary then, however difficult it may be, to keep the two points together, in order to escape both *dogmatism* and *relativism*.

On the one hand, it is to some extent true that Kant is close to dogmatism (not dogmatic method!) when it comes to cognitive respect or pure ethics, as the first two *Critiques*, with their corresponding “sciences”, the *Metaphysics of Nature* and the *Metaphysics of Morals*, attest. On the other hand, the philosopher wrote both a *Prolegomena* and a *Foundation*, which could be seen as propaedeutic texts, preparing the ground in the empirical (be it physics or customary morality) so that it can then be fertilised by the *ditio*, be it transcendental or metaphysical. But, if this is so, where will we then find the intermediate link?

Between the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*, the link would be represented – from the transcendental point of view – by the *Critique of Judgement*. In it, the reflective judgement serves as the proto-judgement at the basis of every determining judgement, whether it be a constitutive principle of the experience of the understanding or a categorical imperative of the maxims of the will. But what could be the mediator between the two types of *metaphysics*?

1. From Nature to Morality (in an ascending sense) will be mediated by the *philosophy of history*, whose protagonist is *Cultur*, in continuous evolution, and

whose definition is: «The productive realisation [*Hervorbringung*] of the aptitude of a rational being for any kind of ends in general (thus in the use of his freedom)». With regard to its essential, teleological value, for Kant it is *Culture*: «the ultimate end that one has reason to ascribe to nature in regard of the human species» (Kant [1790a] §83: 431; eng. 299). Now, the fundamental characteristic of Culture is the inequality between men, which engenders (in an expression borrowed from the Augustinian *City of God*) the «splendid misery [*glänzende Elend*]», produced by those who devote themselves to the «less necessary parts» (but for that very reason more worthy and free; [1790a]: 432; eng. 299) of social evolution: science and art.

The point is that this takes place only when – as in Aristotle – a development (read also: an *imbalance*) has been reached, that allows the “Sons of the Master-Warrior” (to use the Hegel of the *Phenomenology*) to devote their *leisure* to such lofty pursuits. Before, at the beginning of history (and of every particular history), there is always *savage*, lawless *violence*. Not without reason, however hidden it may seem at first. For such *human, all too human violence*, is “necessary” to tear men, still considered in *statu nascendi* (that is, as animals) away from their stepmother, Nature (see [1788]: 146; eng. 257). But, on the other hand, it is also necessary for man, when forming collectively a people, to come to disavow (Kant points out long before Freud of *Totem and Taboo*) the supposed common father (thus considering the subjects themselves as *congeniti*). The reason for this double rejection is clear. Indeed, on the side of the “stepmother”, men are subjected to all sorts of hardships, culminating in war. On the side of the people, they are subjected to the despotism of the Autocrat, against whom they will necessarily rebel, if they want to be truly *free* men, because in this pre-civilised state there is still no law (what reigns is, at most, reverential fear: Sacredness plus Majesty, before the one who pretends to be the descendant of the Founding Father). Hence the natural state of men is conflict, war (lawless savages). Incidentally, it was the “natural” sorrows that led them, first, to unite as a People and to invent a common Father: a sovereign from whom the present one would descend.

On the contrary, the *civilised* principle of the (*eschatological*) end of history is... violence as the guarantor of law (it is both significant and suspicious that the German term for “lawless violence” and “coercive power” is one and the same: *die Gewalt*). Speaking still mythically, it can therefore be said that this guarantee rests on the recognition of a *common mother*, as the embodiment of universal reason on earth: the Republic or *natio* (the national state). On the other hand, one can well guess that the true father is “God”. And indeed, at the end of history, “nature” will eventually reveal itself as *Vorsehung*, as is clear from the Kantian equation: «Such a *justification* of nature – or better, of Providence [*Vorsehung*] – is not an unimportant motive for choosing a particular point of view for considering the world» ([1784]: 30; eng. 119). For it is only in the republic that the realm

of ends can be established as, in turn, a true and definitive *res publica* (*respublica noumenon*: see [1798b]: 91; eng. 306). Such would be Kant's confirmation and at the same time transcendental correction – neither immanent (Marx), nor transcendent (Bossuet) – of the two Augustinian cities.

2. From Morality to Nature (descending path) it will be the law that will act as a mediator between the two metaphysical extremes. The problem now lies in the fact that, coming from reason (a factor of unity) and not from nature (a factor of multiplicity), law *ideally* advocates the equality of citizens, subject to the common law represented by the sovereign, whereas culture *factually* establishes, as we have seen, inequality. This is why a *tertium quid* is finally necessary, in which culture and law are knotted in chiasmus. This third (an application of reason which is at the same time a prudent consideration of the natural passions of men, especially of princes) is *politics*. Here too a story is told (Kant tells us): from continuous wars (of extermination, rapine and conquest) as the natural end of Peoples, and then as a means of realisation of States (*la raison d'État*), to positive *peace* (obviously, it must coincide – they are convergent paths – with the development of Culture) in the Republic, *ad intra*, and in a Federation of Republics *ad extra*, tendentially ecumenical. The driving force of this true “arrow of history” would be the so-called *revelatio sub contrario* (so much exploited later by the Romantics). In any case, the evils brought about by the natural tendencies of the princes, on the one hand, and by the natural tendencies of the bourgeoisie (the *Handelsgeist*), on the other, (since both politicians and merchants want to dominate the world) will have to be corrected mutually, according to the demands of Practical Reason.

And finally, in the centre and as the cordial centre of Politics, shines our *libellum*, this guide that leads us – *velis nolis* – *Towards perpetual peace*.

But now that we have reached the *locus naturalis* of our work by means of a certain *regressus transcendentalis*, we might ask, recalling the initial *habent sua fata libelli*, about the “destiny” of the work. For the time being, it is clear that even if this cannot depend solely on the *readers' grasp*, but also on the rational potential (not strictly “logical”, however, but rather *dialogical*) contained in the text in the form of textual incitements, this potential, these incitements are deployed (and are more easily accessible to us) in the two current readings, extremely opposed, of the Kantian opusculum.

One is clearly *condemnatory*, although it does so in an indirect way, i.e. not by focusing on Kant and his work, but on the consequences of it, in a negatively exemplary way. This is Frantz Fanon's (1963) or Edward Said's (1996) reading of European enlightened culture – or ideology? –, which would have covered up its systematic absorption of Third World goods and lives through the “proposal” of its *superior* and emancipatory culture, thus

adding to colonialism an underhand *cultural imperialism*, passing off as *ecumenism* and *the pursuit of perpetual peace* an obvious *Eurocentric* hegemony. The other reading, on the other hand, followed by the majority of Kant's interpreters and by various philosophers and politicians (*ça va sans dire*), is openly laudatory, celebrating Kant's proposal of *enlightened pacifism*. Such is the highly influential position of Ottfried Höffe, for whom: «Kant [...] defends a peace that is as global as ecumenical, a peace that is universal in both temporal and spatial terms» (Höffe [1995]: 15). In this respect, it should be noted that what is relevant in this case is not so much the fact that the former provides abundant reasons to attack, if not directly Kant, then the *Kantian idea of Europe* (see Tully [2002]: 347 ff.), but the surprising fact that the latter (an illustrious “professor of philosophy”, not a “committed intellectual”) feels obliged to *defend* Kant.

What has happened? On the surface at least, what has happened is clearly a rebellion – not very “Kantian” – of experience, of a *damaged* – not to say “badly wounded” – historical present, against the dictates of reason².

What is most striking in this respect, seen from the most pressing current situation, is precisely that the *three definitive articles* (derived from pure reason, which consequently and unappealably demands their fulfilment) seem to have been effectively achieved, at least reasonably (as is *logical*). Let us recall that these famous articles establish the need to:

1° A *republican Constitution*, with its three features: freedom for those who abide by it, as men; subjection under the law, as *subjects*; equality before it, as *citizens* (see Kant [1795]: 349; eng. 322);

2° A *Federation of free peoples*, as a *substitute* for an impossible – and even undesirable, after the experience of the *Terreur – Weltrepublik*, which, if imposed, would oscillate between despotism and anarchy (see [1795]: 354; eng. 325);

3° *The right of hospitality*, as an intermediate element between colonialist interventionism and the “closed commercial state”, which Fichte would advocate five years after the pamphlet (see [1795]: 357; eng. 328).

It is easy to see that the three articles are intended to underpin the three usual areas of law: civil, international (*ius gentium*) and cosmopolitan. And their complete fulfilment should lead to a definitive and *positive* peace, based on equality (derived from the first article), concord (according to the second) and *commercium* (according to the third).

Now, as the very prudent Kant points out, this peace should never be achieved without giving some satisfaction, however precarious, to the six *preliminary articles*, inasmuch as these, taken from experience (in any case, teleologically oriented), must be the *conditio sine qua non* of peace, since it is those articles which establish a *negative peace*; this is why their statements are also negative, whether they are *prohibitive laws* (i.e., mandatory) or *permissive laws* (to be

applied according to the circumstances). Well, it is scandalous that, today as in the past, none of them have been complied with at all, nor are there any rational indications of it. Let us briefly recall these laws:

A) *Prohibitive*

Art. 1° – *Mental reservation* – A peace treaty concluded with the mental reservation of certain motives capable of provoking another war in the future is not to be considered valid (see [1795]: 343; eng. 317). Or, more briefly and classically: *pacta sunt servanda*. In this respect, suffice it to think – *a sensu contrario*, and without being polemical – of the oscillating elections in Iraq (30 January 2005), between US imperialist interests and the obvious “mental reservation” of the religious Shiites, who send their faithful to vote in order to “democratically” sanction a regime that, as in the Iranian Shiite “revolution” (or in the frustrated one in Algeria), would begin by overthrowing the system that has brought it to power.

Art. 5° – *Against interference in internal affairs* – «No state shall interfere by force in the constitution and government of another state» ([1795]: 346; eng. 319). Just a few cases. On the Russian side: the annexation first of Chechnya, the conflicts with Georgia and Ossetia, and the invasion now of Ukraine, with foresee able extension to Moldova and Transnistria (see Duque [2022]). As for the United States, long-standing interventions – probably supported by the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 – in its *backyard* have been numerous: the almost simultaneous occupation of Haiti in 1915 and the Dominican Republic in 1916 (repeated fifty years later), Grenada and Nicaragua; not to mention the Iraqi attempt in 1990 to annex Kuwait, which – through the 2001 attacks – eventually led to the US invasion of Iraq (and Afghanistan) in 2003, thus doubly fulfilling the «bagatelle» or «*peccatillum*» denounced by Kant: «to devouring a *small* state, if a *much larger* one presumably derives from it a greater good for the world» (Kant [1795]: 385; eng. 350), etc. Or, from France: Chad, Ivory Coast, etc., etc.

Art. 6° – *Dishonourable stratagems* – «No state at war with another should allow itself to use hostilities which make mutual confidence in future peace impossible» ([1795]: 346; eng. 320). All the stratagems enumerated by Kant (*percussions, venefici, perduellio*, etc.) and many more that neither he nor his time could have imagined are now commonly employed, thus turning the state of exception into a *normal* state (as Benjamin [1974]: 697 already feared, according to Thesis VIII of *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*).

Against the Geneva Convention, and against the mere sentiment of human dignity, these stratagems have been and continue to be used in times of war: poisoning by Russia, chemical weapons and targeted assassinations by Israel, *kamikazes* by Palestinians, torture and humiliation in Abu Ghraib (Baghdad), and

surely the most shameful: the prisoners held in Guantánamo without trial, without any possibility of defence... and without even being charged with specific charges; and all this, both in a continuous regime of *warfare* or in a precarious state of peace, as a powerful deterrent (remember the Cuban Bay of Pigs landing, the selective interventions in Iran in the Reagan era, the mutual espionage in the Cold War, etc.).

If, therefore, these laws are binding, but are constantly violated in the bloodiest manner, it is difficult to think – even utopically – of the establishment, here on earth and in secular time, of a peace... no longer perpetual, but moderately lasting.

But let us now look at the other laws:

B) *Permissive*

Art. 2° – *Against colonialism and annexation* – «No independently existing state (whether large or small) shall be acquired by another state through inheritance, exchange, purchase or donation» (Kant [1795]: 344; eng. 318). It is true that such acquisition does not take place directly today, but this does not prevent an aggressive industrial, cultural and tourist colonisation from growing and spreading worldwide (just look at the “acquisition” of “our Spanish” Canary or Balearic Islands by the Germans and the English). At the same point, Kant also alludes to the “sale” of subjects by absolutist princes (tacitly pointing to Hanover, who was sending soldiers to America at the time, to fight with the English against the rebels)³.

Today, the sale is free and “voluntary” (at least on the part of the American army that sent its troops to Iraq and Afghanistan to fight terrorist rebels and the *taliben*, so that some soldiers from its *backyard*⁴ – not to speak of mercenaries – might one day hopefully become *cives americani*, as Niall Ferguson enthusiastically sings, arguing that stupendous decorations for bravery (the *Purple Hearts*), and something even more valuable, US citizenship, had already been awarded to many foreign soldiers fighting in Iraq, just as in the old days service in the legions was the path to becoming a *civis romanus* (see Ferguson [2004] and Smith [1997]).

Art. 3° – *Disappearance of armies* – «Standing armies (*miles perpetuus*) shall in time completely disappear» (Kant [1795]: 345; eng. 318). It is true that, in many countries, there is no longer any compulsory military service (recently introduced at that time in Prussia, and then in the new French Republic), and this is because of what Kant pointed out, namely that the arms race leads to an unbearable burden of military expenditure on the part of the manufacturing and merchant class (which makes itself heard in the government, since it is mainly they who bear the burden of taxation). Moreover, Kant makes a “patriotic” exception

on this point (still followed today in Switzerland): the replacement of armies permanently ready for war by regular voluntary military exercises for defence purposes. Today, by contrast, “armed patriots” are successfully replaced by more or less covert mercenaries (although, if the conflict in Ukraine drags on, compulsory military service will surely return to Scandinavia, the Baltic Republics and Germany). Come what may, Kant could not have foreseen that, in time, the arms industry – both for open warfare and for the bellicose preparation for imminent conflicts – would encompass a large part of the manufacturing establishment, with the *big bourgeoisie* being the first to be interested in the continuous state of (preferably external) war, transformed, moreover, into *information warfare*: a technological refinement of what was already announced by Ernst Jünger in *Die totale Mobilmachung* (1930), and later denounced as *the globalisation of the arms industry* by the late Heidegger in his Le Thor Seminars (see Heidegger [1986]: 359).

Incidentally, this same nefarious trade calls into question, without further ado, the following article on perpetual peace:

Art. 4^o – *Against foreign debt* – The state must not contract debts whose purpose is to support its trade (see Kant [1795]: 345; eng. 318). Kant was already lamenting this ingenious stratagem, in his time recently invented by Great Britain. Today, apart from the aforementioned sale of arms to third world countries, we can only recall the bankruptcy of the Argentine Republic twenty years ago (and the one that will probably follow, with the government of Javier Milei, and in general the enormous debts that Latin America has outstanding with the World Bank... and the United States itself with its rival: the People’s Republic of China.

As can be seen, after summarising Kant and outlining current counterexamples, there is no room for much optimism in a world where permissiveness certainly takes precedence over prohibition. One cannot even hope for a gradual improvement of the situation (for even if such an improvement existed until 2022 in the European Union, it was only in a privileged part of the planet, at the expense of the impoverishment of the other nations). Incidentally, it would be all too easy (though not entirely unreasonable) to blame all this on the “malice of man”, or rather on his “foolishness” (*Thorheit*), which, according to Kant, is more characteristic of our species than evil (see [1798a]: 332; eng. 427).

It is true that any “connoisseur” of classical German philosophy, whether more or less adept or influenced by it (as is certainly my case) could argue against all of the above, that experience can *never* invalidate an Idea. In this case, the count of evils and failures cannot and should not call into question something that is a *regulative Idea*: that of the achievement of peace, presented by Kant himself as an “interesting hypothesis” (i.e. one that arouses interest), regardless of whether this Idea has a reference in history or not (i.e. whether it will never be realised).

For, for the philosopher, this Idea constitutes the «final end» of Law (Kant [1797]: 355; eng. 491)⁵ – just as ecumenism constitutes the ultimate end of culture, constituting the geopolitical basis for the establishment of peace. Kant could not have expressed it more solemnly: «Now practical-moral reason pronounces in us its irresistible *veto*: *There must be no war* [*Es soll kein Krieg sein*]». And he goes on saying, in a language oscillating between the language of the categorical imperative and that of the fictionalist *Hinzudenken*: «We must act *as if* [als ob] there were something [i.e. perpetual peace], which perhaps is not, working for that constitution which seems to us most suitable to achieve peace (perhaps the republicanism of all states, in their union)» ([1797]: 354; eng. 491). As the philosopher clearly points out, the establishment of a positive and lasting peace is not something that can be “proved” by experience, nor expected from it, but *is demanded* «a priori *by reason*, from the ideal of a rightful bond of men under public laws» ([1797]: 355; eng. 491). In conclusion, and *a sensu contrario*: no experience, however catastrophic and constant it may be (think, for example, of Auschwitz), will ever annul something that is a rational requirement.

That is fine. The point is that the problem is not this, but the possible *geopolitical perversion* of the fulfilment of the three definitive articles by virtue of the *synthetic demand* (to use Kantian terms), for the political realisation of the “noble” entities of “philosophy of history” presented in those articles. Indeed, it does not require a great effort of imagination to see:

1) that *republicanism*, today, has universal validity – and strength – as a more or less underhanded Democratic Imperialism, strongly contested, moreover, by the so-called Global South;

2) that the *Federation of Free Nation States* is now embodied, not in an almost inert and decaying UN, but in the brand-new European Union, which is still a closed territory *vis-à-vis* non-European outsiders. And the great challenge lies in whether the search for a cultural identity for the new Europe is not already bristling with difficulties at the EU border, as opposed to the hospitable ideal that the United States *once* showed towards *European... immigrants*;

3) that the “right of hospitality” has been extended planetary-wide, thanks to the establishment of a World Free Market, until it has led to *Globalisation*: democratic *ad intra*, but by dint of exercising a burdensome neo-colonisation *ad extra*, more or less disguised through “allied” puppet governments, against the “rogue states” or a new “civilising” and *multipolar Imperialism*, led by China.

To put it in Kantian terms, it is clear that today, over the entire face of the earth, the *Handelsgeist* has been imposed by degree or by force, either under the threat of arms (*hard power*) or by “cultural” penetration through the mass media (*soft power*) – terms popularised by Nye in his very illuminating work (see Nye [2003]).

Indeed, there seems to have been a *geopolitical* irruption of the First Article into the Second, and certainly in a direction unsuspected by Kant, namely: the suspicion is growing that the Republicanism of the New Empire (already in decline) is not only the *condition* and defensive bastion of the possibility of the European Union, but that it is also carrying out the dirty work (proper to the Powers of Modernity) that allows the Federation's interior (proper to Postmodernity) to remain peaceful and prosperous... until now. For it would be precisely the bellicose American "shield" that would allow Europeans to be politely democratic and progressive, pretending to settle everything by means of conventions and treaties. Such is Robert Kagan's somewhat ageing thesis, whose accusation of cynicism directed at the major European powers cannot be on the spot dismissed: «Europe's rejection of power politics and its devaluing of military force as a tool of international relations have depended on the presence of American military forces on European soil» (Kagan [2003]: 73).

Europe's new Kantian order could only flourish under the umbrella of American power, exercised according to the rules of the old Hobbesian order. And then, it would have been America's own power that made it possible for Europeans to think that power itself no longer mattered. If we now follow Kagan, «the fact that U.S. military power has solved the European problem, especially the "German problem", allows Europeans today, and Germans in particular, to believe that American military power, and the "strategic culture" that has created and sustained it, is outmoded and dangerous» ([2003]: 73). In short, as it turns out, Europe would be, for the American analyst (and subsequently, for Donald Trump himself), both ungrateful and opportunist. The indirect exhortation is of course clear: if we want to remain free and democratic *ad intra*, then enough of the mushy stuff, we need to "get our hands dirty" *ad extra*, both in funding and in military aid, which is what the Empire "selflessly" does.

Be that as it may, Kagan picks up a distinction with which we can perhaps enter into the *bad conscience* of the Kantian opuscle, when delving into its intricacies:

«Among themselves, Europeans may "operate on the basis of laws and open cooperative security" [Robert Cooper *dixit*]. But when dealing with the world outside Europe, "we need to revert to the rougher methods of an earlier era – force, pre-emptive attack, deception, whatever is necessary"» ([2003]: 74)⁶. This frank confession, contrary of course to any *Kantian* attitude and way of being (not to speak of "thinking") – in short, this brutal allusion to pre-emptive war, and above all to deception, is nevertheless highly illuminating, for it may lead us to suspect that, precisely in the *cosmopolitan* (or *geopolitical*, in current terms) respect, it is not the fulfilment of the provisional articles that lends a guarantee and offers a geohistorical (empirical, in short) basis to the definitive articles (remember: those expressing rational and lawful principles), but precisely their

non-compliance. Let us try to think about this true *katastrophé*, or “inversion”, of the normative plane, and let us venture the following causal concatenation: if Republicanism, the Federation of Free States and Globalisation have imposed themselves on a planetary scale, it is because they are the result of a globalisation of the world:

- because covenants are not honoured, or are entered into with the mental reservation of transgressing them at the first opportunity (reverse side of art. 1°);
- because states (especially those in the so-called Global South, formerly Third World) are now dependent on both multinational industries and the International Monetary Fund (with almost total loss of sovereignty: reverse side of art. 2° and art. 4°);
- because standing armies, whether national, international or mercenary, are progressively increasing in effectiveness (i.e. destructive potential), just as the arms budget in the United States is growing out of all proportion to the point of threatening the economic bankruptcy of the country itself (contrary to art. 3°);
- because the United States now, like UK and, until very recently, France (in the Sahel or Côte d’Ivoire) sets up and removes governments at will, an interventionism now carried out militarily by Russia, and economically and industrially by China (against Kant’s art. 5°);
- and because all sorts of dishonourable stratagems are used to maintain the dominance of the *New World Order* in all areas, according to the obscene slogan: *Wrong or Right, my Country* (reverse side of art. 6°).

In my opinion, it is difficult to ignore the obvious fact⁷ of this perverse teleological causality (which we can summarise as follows: *the systematic non-compliance with the preliminary articles makes possible and encourages the establishment and consolidation of the content of the three definitive articles*), which inverts and disrupts the whole delicate Kantian *machinery* in favour of peace. However, what is relevant now is to ask (leaving aside the *explicit* good intentions of Kant’s pamphlet) whether from this and other texts of his one can glean – without making a twisted and malicious reading of them – some convictions or suggestions (rather than clearly articulated conceptions) that might support even to some extent this perversion (again, surely without Kant’s express awareness of it). In the end, this suspicion can only be supported by the philosopher’s own indication – genuinely *hermeneutic* –, according to which the interpreter can understand a classical text, if not *better*, as Kant says instead (see Kant [1790b]: 187), but at least *in such a way* that its reading is relevant to illuminate – and criticise, if necessary – a present which, in order to ideologically consolidate a supposedly “democratic” predominance, relies more or less tacitly on a writing that is considered to be little less than the *Charta magna* of modern political philosophy.

For my part, I will try to show that, in fact, at least in a latent form, there are convictions in Kant that have developed in a sinister, but not entirely unexpected, way. And I believe that a true homage to the memory of the philosopher can consist precisely in bringing to light some of the shadowy aspects of his mentality.

In the first place, I will argue that the three basic features of *republicanism*: freedom, subjection to law and equality, cease to present the character of *evidence* that Kantian (and in general, liberal or social-democratic) exegesis has conferred on them; and this, from the moment we *specify* the nuances that accompany such august terms. First of all, the idea of *freedom* set out in the First Definitive Article is based – I believe – on a purely logical idea (and moreover a *logical-formal* one, or if you like: *analytical*, insofar as it is deduced from the mere principle of non-contradiction) of *legal* freedom (with the negative consequences this has for the identity of individuals and groups). And as for the other two features: subjection to a single and homogeneous source of law, as well as equality before the law, I believe that they derive from a schematism as universal and vacuous as it is abstract, which can then be *manipulated* ideologically, as we shall see.

Now, on this First Definitive Article (that of the Constitution or republican *Verfassung*) rest the next two (Free Federation and Cosmopolitanism), so that the suspicions that fall on it cannot fail to extend to the following ones. This close relationship has been defended by Kant himself in Thesis VIII of his *Idee*⁸. But – and this point is fundamental – in order to achieve the advent of this republican constitution (internal and external), it is absolutely necessary, according to Kant's own repeated confession, to ward off the *spectre of war*, in turn, both internal (civil war) and external (international). And if this is so, it seems difficult to escape the conclusion that Republicanism and war (even if the latter is seen as a mere imminent possibility and thus as an *Abschreckungsmanöver*) *belong together*. For, in the present state of affairs (on a *pragmatic – sensu kantiano –*, and not merely empirical, level), it may well be that the possibility of a civil war is prevented by the unanimous cry of the citizens themselves (*Es soll unter uns kein Krieg mehr sein!*); but on the down side, in the international sphere, as Kant himself admits: «War cannot be seen in any other way than as a *modus ius suum persequendi* (*pacem parare bello*), and must be conducted until mutual confidence in the state of peace is possible» ([1797]: 601). That such a war is not peculiar to backward peoples or to ages happily overcome, but corresponds to “civilised” nations, is something patent from the continuation of this Kantian *Reflection*. War is permissible, he says, «only in so far as its conduct can coexist with an effective inclination towards the attainment of future peace» ([1797]: 601).

As is well known, the guiding idea in Kantian philosophy is that of *revelatio sub contrario* (which will influence later romanticism, especially Friedrich Schlegel), namely, that it is only through continuous wars, through the loss of dignity of people and countries, through the destruction of all kinds caused by

war conflicts and, *last but not least*, in view of the losses in the sphere of trade and *commerce*: only through continuous wars, through the loss of dignity of people and countries, through the destruction of all kinds caused by war conflicts and, *last but not least*, in view of the losses in the field of trade, only after these hardly repairable damages can the Princes of Europe (for it is to them that Kant addresses himself in *Towards Perpetual Peace*, as Fichte had done two years earlier) come to establish lasting treaties of peace. However, theoretically (and what is valid in theory must be valid in practice for Kant), as has already been hinted at, the problem lies in the fact that, from the side of historical evolution, culture (after all, secretly directed by the “stepmother” nature) demands inequality and thus war, while from the timeless side of law (directly derived from the moral law) what is demanded is equality and thus perpetual peace (as the ultimate end of the species). How can this disparity between the historical-political (pragmatic) and the legal and moral (practical) level be resolved?

In my opinion, the Kantian stratagem recall the adage: *The worse, the better*. What else is there to think of this so un-Kantian, unheard-of *praise of war*: «At the stage of culture where humankind still stand, war is an indispensable means of bringing culture still further; and it is only after a (God knows when) completed culture, that an everlasting peace would be healthy for us, peace which, in turn, would be possible only by means of it [i.e., of the completed culture]» (Kant [1786]: 121; eng. 173ff.). To the extension and fulfilment of culture, by the extension of war, then? Can Kantian words be read calmly after the two World Wars, or rather: after the two *European Civil Wars*? Moreover, in §83 of the third *Critique*, we can find an anthropological – if not even “theological” – justification of war that seems clearly in praise of it. Kant says that, given the three fundamental (which I would call *anthropogenic*) passions, namely the lust for honour, dominion and riches (*Ehrsucht, Herrschsucht, Habsucht*), war is irremediable on the part of those who hold coercive power (*Gewalt*), i.e. the Princes.

However, far from being a sign of the incurable malice of men (or more precisely: *apart* from being superficially the product of men’s “unbridled passions”), war is: «a deeply hidden, and perhaps intentional, effort of supreme wisdom if not to establish, then at least to prepare the conjunction of legality with the freedom of states, and thus the unity of a morally grounded system». Incidentally, note that here Kant is no longer speaking of “Nature” (the promoter of Culture, as we know), but directly of the *oberste Weisheit*, i.e. of God himself. And more: Kant adds to the point that, despite the misfortunes it brings about, war «is nevertheless a further motive (even if the hope for a peaceful state, proper to the happiness of peoples, is receding further and further away) for developing all those talents which serve for culture to their highest degree» ([1790a]: 433; eng. 300). Further proof that neither the *Ruhestand* (unless that is not the “true” peace) nor the happiness of the people is of much interest to Kant. For it is evident to him

that culture, guided by Nature (or by Divine Wisdom, which is now becoming indiscernible from the former?), is not intended to make men happy, but to make them *better*. And for this purpose it hardens them in war. Until they can do no more, and give up their natural existence... or (I add, on my own account) perish in a total war, in this dangerous “experiment” that Wisdom is carrying out at the expense of concrete men (let us say: of the man “in the street”).

According to Kantian texts themselves, there is of course no half-measures. Either there will always be – in history – war, or, when there is finally perpetual peace (remember that *ewig* means rather “eternal”), it will happen... at the end of history, at the end of time. For the intervals between wars are nothing but the continuation of the conflict in other ways. In this, Kant is absolutely Hobbesian⁹. *Mutatis mutandis*, and in today’s terms: the *perpetual* wars of and in history point to eternal peace in post-history. Today, if we were to follow Kagan, this implication would have become spatial, *geopolitical*: US military intervention in Europe – first in the Balkans and now in Ukraine, and beyond: in Afghanistan, Iraq, and tomorrow in Iran – would be precisely what would allow internal peace within the European Union, as long as the latter contributes to the prolongation and expansion of wars – now *proxies* – with financing and armaments... largely bought from the Empire.

But is it not contradictory that war drives culture, on the one hand, and that it is precisely culture that ultimately puts an end to war, on the other? For Kant, it seems not: because Nature (the hidden motor of culture) is inwardly “animated” by Providence (the personification of the moral law), so that its *Vollendung* (that of nature and that of culture), its end or *télos*, will also be its end (*tò éschaton*).

Perfect circularity: what was already *rationaly* inscribed *ab initio* will be *historically* fulfilled in the end. And in the end, finally, everything will be *artificial*. Everything, the work of man (thank God, and at the expense of Nature): remember that, for Kant, the *natural* state of the individual (and of States) is the state of war, and that peace is an *artificial* construct erected for a double and antithetical motive: out of fear of war... of extinction (as seen in the *Hängeschild* of the Dutch tavern, with whose description the pamphlet begins), and out of obedience to the unconditional imperative of law.

But how is it possible to understand such a paradoxical ending? Let us see. At least, the philosopher’s general thesis on the pragmatic (geopolitical) level is clear: the differences between men, sharpened by culture, are evidently *a matter of passion*, for they are due to Nature (the “stepmother”, or *Stifmutter* of men), not to reason. But – and this is the *punctum fluxionis*, on which everything depends – reason needs passion and its consequences: conflict and war; it needs differences, *as dominated and excluded*, to have in whom to command and what to unify – just as the understanding needs multiplicity, since the categories are nothing but *functions of unification of the multiple*, themselves subjected to the

transcendental subject, which in turn is nothing but a *synthesising unity*. In general: order is nothing but the dynamic, always active subjection – *repugnantia realis* – of disorder. Without resisting and overcoming *Macht* (natural, lawless savagery) there could be no *Gewalt* (coercive power, subordinate to law). On another level, this principle of *domination* (of *Überwindung*, not of *Aufhebung*) had already been clearly formulated in the pre-critical period, by treating *repugnantia realis* as a real “conflict” (*Widerstreit*), and not as a logical “contradiction” (*Widerspruch*): «In this case, – says Kant – rest [*Ruhe*: remember the *Ruhestand*] occurs, not because the motive forces are lacking, but because they are acting against each other» (Kant [1763]: 199; eng. 236).

Applying this universal principle to our subject matter, perpetual peace – or at least its possibility, already established at least regulatively, *hic et nunc*, by the hegemonic Power – would then consist in the subjection (or, taking things to the extreme, in the submission and subjugation) of the lurking tendencies to disorder, *again and again*, by the New World Order, *again and again* triumphant, for the time being. The differential passions would thus be something like Goethe’s Mephistopheles: a poor devil who, from this perspective, seems to be part of a parody drawn from a philosophy that to the great poet seemed mechanical: reading Kant, Goethe said, would be like entering a *loom*. And indeed, Mephistopheles is the spirit that always denies, but only so that the affirmative light of the Eternal Feminine and of Supreme Love may shine upon that shadow.

In both cases, however, in Goethe and in Kant, it is *domination* that is important. *Peace is the perpetual internalisation of war* (incidentally, the late Schelling went down this road: not *Aufhebung*, but *Überwindung* of evil: in this sense, evil is as necessary for good as war is for peace). But even if the blessed peace were to be achieved (and among the countries of the European Union, at least, it seems to have been achieved so far), the war would then return, is already returning, forever vanquished, like a “spectre” (*revenant*, as the French call it).

We would have annulled the differences between men (Kant speaks of religious confessions and languages) and thus begun to annul *individual* men, different from each other (each differing even from each other, within each other), in the name of Humanity, of *kath'exochén* Man: a Free Being, Equal, Subject to the Law. Subject, of course, to a Law that he repeats and recites over and over again, ingurgitating itself in a Talmudic manner: Freedom, Equality, Subjection. Pure circuit. *Circulus in probando*. Such is the (bad) dream of humanism, for which perhaps that philosopher from Königsberg, who thought he was rationally *cherishing the dream of peace*, is in some way responsible. A beautiful oxymoron, with disturbing consequences.

Today and always. *The Rest is Silence*.

(Translated by Tobia Frazzica)

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Notes

- 1 Recall that, in Kant, *Gewalt* (if illegitimate, «violence»; otherwise: «coercive power») is a power (*Macht*) so powerful – the redundancy is forced – that it can overcome the resistance of that what, in its turn, possesses power (see Kant [1790a] §28: 260; eng. 143).
- 2 Höffe speaks of «moralisch gebotene Utopie» (Höffe [1995]: 15).
- 3 At the same time, Friedrich Hölderlin composed a first draft (*Erster Entwurf*: ca. 1796) of his ode *Der Tod fürs Vaterland*: «O Schlacht fürs Vaterland, / Flammendes blutendes Morgenrot / Des Deutschen, der, wie die Sonn, erwacht // Der nun nimmer zögert, der nun / Länger das Kind nicht ist / Denn die sich Väter ihm nannten, / Diebe sind sie, / Die den Deutschen das Kind / Aus der Wiege gestohlen / Und das fromme Herz des Kinds betrogen, // Wie ein zahmes Tier, zum Dienste gebraucht» (Hölderlin [1992]: 624): «Oh, battle for the fatherland, / flaming and bloody dawn / of the German who, like the sun, awakens! // The German, who will never doubt anymore; who now / has long ceased to be a child [or a son], / though the Fathers so called him, / they are thieves, / who robbed the Germans of the child from the cradle [i.e. from its *Heimat*, or homeland], / and deceived the pious heart of the child // as if it were a domesticated animal, placed at their service». – The poet's accusation is direct and unequivocal: in order to clean up his finances, Grand Duke Karl Eugen of Württemberg, the Father of the Fatherland, ordered successive forced levies (*Zwangsaushebungen*) of his young subjects (his "sons", now transformed by Hölderlin into citizens: *enfants de la patrie*), "rented" as it were (*Miet- bzw. Subsidieregiment*) to the Dutch East India Company, which the Dutch assigned to the *Kapregiment* (1786-1808) at the Cape of Good Hope to fight the British, and then sent to the Java Islands (the *Zuckerinseln*, cited by Kant in *Zum ewigen Frieden*). Of the 3.200 soldiers recruited, barely 100 of them returned to their homeland (see Egle [2024]).

- 4 Today, thanks to so-called *proxy wars*, the issue is now more refined, as in the Sahel, where the Ukrainian Timur group fights against the Russian Wagner Group (now whitewashed as an official army corps); or, in the case of the US, sending funding and sophisticated weaponry via NATO to Ukraine, or directly and on its own behalf to Benjamin Netanyahu's Israel, thus tacitly supporting the "special military intervention" in Gaza.
- 5 See the entire *Beschluß zum 3. Absch.: Das Weltbürgerrecht*: «Man kann sagen, daß diese allgemeine und fortdauernde Friedensstiftung nicht bloß einen Theil, sondern den ganzen Endweck der Rechtslehre innerhalb den Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft ausmache».
- 6 On the British diplomat quoted by Kagan, see Cooper (2004).
- 7 Obviously without alluding to Kant, and with an exaggeration sometimes bordering on caricature, Michael Hardt and Toni Negri nevertheless offer – if necessary – such a wealth of facts (not to mention misdeeds) in this respect, that – leaving aside, I insist, Negri's basic thesis – it would be difficult to lead an impartial reader to conclusions other than those mentioned here (see Hardt-Negri [2001]). There is already a sequel (2004), just as voluminous (and just as aggressive): *Multitude*.
- 8 «Man kann die Geschichte der Menschengattung im Großen als die Vollziehung eines verborgenen Plans der Natur ansehen, um eine innerlich- und zu diesem Zwecke auch äußerlich-vollkommene Staatsverfassung zu Stande zu bringen» (Kant [1784]: 27; eng. 116).
- 9 «The nature of war consists not in actual fighting; but in the known disposition thereto, during all the time there is no assurance to the contrary. All other time is peace» (See (Hobbes [1909]: 96). Moreover, Hobbes offers a peaceful, *civil* (never better said) way out of the *status naturalis* between men, but not between states.