The Migration of Democratic Peace Theory

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For Antonio Gramsci, the organic intellectual is a human agent who helps to conserve the social structure or revolutionize it (1971, 342-43). S/he is an integral part of a social class, hence the "organic", and works with ideas and education, hence the "intellectual". Assembling "organic" and "intellectual" together, we get a political agent who is in charge of disseminating values and norms through civil institutions and social artifacts, such as schools, churches, cultural establishments, and popular culture. The values and norms can be libertarian. Then the agents are organic intellectuals of the bourgeoisie class and act to conserve the capitalist social order. The values and norms can be egalitarian. Then the agents are organic intellectuals of the proletariat class and act to revolutionize the capitalist social order towards a socialist one. Within this schema, theoreticians – party to civil and institutional academia – have the capacity to become organic intellectuals.

This potentiality raises three questions. The first is empirical: what actually happens with this potentiality? Do theoreticians materialize their potentiality and act as organic intellectuals? The second question is normative: should theoreticians try and fulfill their potential for being organic intellectuals, or should they remain publicly removed in the ivory tower of academia, aspiring to apolitical scientific neutrality? A third question is: do theoreticians belong to a certain social class? Are they, for example, bourgeoisie or proletariat? Do they instead form a class of their own with its own material and ideational interests? Say, a transnational class of academics? Or do they, alternatively, have the power to act as the Hegelian universal class, serving the interest of humanity as a whole?

These three questions are related and, in what follows, I will treat them together and, by following the political biography of the democratic-peace theories, will offer some Gramsci-inspired normative answers. The democratic-peace theories are the theoretical assertions trying to explain the observed phenomenon that democracies never (or hardly) fight each other. My argument is that those theories migrated outside academia and affected the political world. Crucially, those theories have undergone significant transformation during migration, meeting distortion through political appropriation. In application, democratic peace has thus become radically removed from the intention of its progenitors. Theoreticians, so it seems, can – like any other individual – be deprived of agency over the concepts of their creation. I will argue that, in the case of the democratic peace, theoreticians failed to realize their potential for becoming organic (or, for that matter, universal) intellectuals who serve society. They abandoned their theories to interested ideologues and politicians. Hence, my normative call is for theoreticians to take more seriously the political fates of their theories and their own role as social and political intellectuals. I will further argue that their political agency can and should be one that comes closer to the universal, rather than organic, intellectual.

Democratic Peace: A Political Biography

The migration of theory outside academia can be modeled as a hermeneutical mechanism (Ish-Shalom, 2013, Chapter 1). Following Michael Freeden's (1996) discussion of ideologies, I suggest a reading of 'theories' as holistic associations of political concepts. That is to say, as configurations of decontested political concepts, taken as objective and pre-given, each conferring meaning on – and deriving meaning from – one another. In this sense, theories are much more than mere explanations; they offer a comprehensive world-view of the political phenomena under investigation. Thus, theory presents us with meaningful political concepts, whose function – explicitly or implicitly, predominantly or partially – is to structure our political understanding and motivate us to political action. Importantly, unlike ideologies, I also take theories to be constrained by methodological and epistemological rules; it is

these rules that distinguish ideology from theory (Freeden, 1996, 2). A further point stressed by this model is the metamorphosis that theory undergoes while migrating outside academia, transformed from one form of idea-entity to others; from *theoretical construction*, through a Gramscian-like *public convention*, into *political conviction*. My notion of public convention is inspired by Gramsci's notion of hegemony. It is defined as general background knowledge about the world that is taken for granted, and shapes the commonsensical codes of thinking and behavior. However, there are two important differences between hegemony and public conventions. First, hegemony implies an absolute and all-embracing framed commonsense. Public convention refers to a more limited and partial framed commonsense; one which is limited in scope to only some sectors of society. Second, contrary to Gramsci's reading of hegemony, the theoreticians' agenda need not be a political agenda of advancing certain sectarian interests. Rather, it might involve a sincere quest for some universal truth in the overall service of humanity. Nevertheless, the result might be public conventions. The theoreticians themselves might continuously challenge their own theories (or of their colleagues), but outside academia, an uncritical and unreflective belief in the truth of theories might be established. In other words, theoretical constructions could become public conventions. With the help of political agents, public conventions are transformed into political convictions, defined as specific knowledge engendering a strong, opinionated view that necessitates political action. Those two forms of idea-entity are, in essence, the public and political representations of the academic-born theoretical constructions.

In the public and political representations of theory, the critical examination and reflexivity make way to doxic and dogmatic framings. The theoretical constructions are altered and, at times, distorted into public conventions and political convictions which, more than the theoretical constructions themselves, are the true pushers and shovers in the world. It was public conventions and political convictions which effected the real-world ramifications that are frequently attributed to the democratic-peace theories (which will be referred to here generically as the democratic-peace thesis). It is in this transformation, if not purposeful distortion, in which we see theoreticians' failure to realize their capacity to act as responsible intellectuals. The theoreticians let politicians and ideologues marshal the political destinies of their theories, while they shield themselves in the ivory tower that academia can sometimes be.

Such was the function of the political convictions of the democratic-peace thesis in both the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and America's commencement of the Iraq War. The former is a case of political mobilization of the rhetorical capital of the democratic-peace thesis (Ish-Shalom, 2013, Chapter 4). The latter was a case in which the thesis' political representation framed the strategic thinking of the neoconservatives and the Bush administration, leading them to believe in the strategic merits of democratization (Ish-Shalom, 2013, chapter 5).

Rhetorical capital is the aggregate persuasive resource of entities, including theories. The rhetorical capital of democratic peace was mobilized rhetorically by Israeli politicians, most notably by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Netanyahu's many public addresses over the past few years reveal him as an adept political entrepreneur in exploiting the democratic-peace thesis. One of his best-known speeches took place on July 10, 1996, shortly after his first inauguration, when he addressed a joint session of the U.S. Congress. In it, Netanyahu referred to democratic peace as a well-established fact. "I am not revealing a secret to the Members of this Chamber when I say that modern democracies do not initiate aggression. This has been the central lesson of the 20th century. States that respect the human rights of their citizens are not likely to provoke hostile action against their neighbors." Netanyahu assumes non-belligerence of democracies to be common knowledge for Americans; in other words, an American public convention of world affairs. And having stated this common knowledge, he advances not the democratic peace as a theoretical construction, but rather as public convention, and more so as political conviction. First, he reinforces what he maintains is an observed fact about democracies: "modern democracies do not initiate aggression." Second, he claims that it is states that are the subject of these observations. True as it is, the political consequences of this declaration are that before democratizing the Palestinians, we need to enable them to establish a state. But to do that, we need to end the Israeli civil and military presence in the Palestinian territories. This implication, however, is absent from Netanyahu's analysis; it contravenes his political agenda. What this marks is the political abuse of the democratic-peace thesis; Netanyahu ideologically and rhetorically decontests its political concepts according to the political needs of his own agenda, distorting some of the theory's claims and ignoring others.

Another tenet of Netanyahu's address was the collective identity of democracies and the need to strengthen Israel on

the basis of this common identity. Thus, “the proper course for the democratic world, led by the United States, is to strengthen the only democracy in the Middle East, Israel.” He emphasized this even more in other speeches following September 11, 2001, when global terrorism became the main topic on the U.S. international agenda. Netanyahu was no longer prime minister by then, [1] but rather foreign minister in Sharon’s government. In this new global context, Netanyahu advanced the doxic version of democratic peace even further: democracy is no longer just less aggressive, it does not practice terrorism, and hence democratization is the ultimate solution to terror. This is the main theme of his address to the U.S. Senate on October 4, 2002, and again on May 5, 2002—about six weeks before Bush’s declaration of his Roadmap plan for the Middle East—at the Ashbrook Center for Public Affairs at Ashland University in Ohio: “The totalitarian mindset is the root cause of terrorism… If we leave this last region of the world [the Arab and Islamic world] undemocratized, unventilated by the winds of freedom, we are toying with our common survival. Not with Israel’s survival, but the survival of our civilization.” Netanyahu contends that the United States’ role is to provide leadership to the free world, and compliments President Bush for doing so. Here, again, we witness the politicization of theory: democratic peace has been transformed into an antidote not only against war among states, but also against terrorism, and en route is used to demarcate a democratic “we” from a nondemocratic “they.”

At the time, Netanyahu’s political and rhetorical uses and abuses of the democratic-peace thesis successfully fostered an American public atmosphere that was supportive of Israel and conducive to Bush’s Roadmap of June 2002, bringing about yet another delay in resuming negotiations with the Palestinians following the second Intifada. This politics of postponement allowed the development of new Israeli settlements in the occupied territories, which the Israeli government regarded as facts on the ground that would carry weight in future final status negotiations. This successful politics of postponement is also evident in President Bush’s letter to Prime Minister Sharon of April 14, 2004, where he affirms Israel’s claim that the final resolution must consider the map of Israel’s settlements.

The case of the American neoconservatives is different. It is not a rhetorical manipulation, but rather a case in which the thesis’ political representations, as public conventions and later as political convictions, framed the neoconservatives’ understanding of the world and of world politics. Endorsing the political representations of the democratic peace, the neoconservatives preached democracy promotion for the sake of national security. This was true of Charles Krauthammer’s “democratic realism” (Krauthammer, 2004), and also the more global version favored by William Kristol, who, with Lawrence Kaplan, argued that “The strategic value of democracy is reflected in a truth of international politics: Democracies rarely, if ever, wage war against one another” (Kaplan and Kristol, 2003:104). What we see in Kaplan and Kristol’s statement is a simplification and politicization of the theoretical constructions of the democratic-peace thesis and their metamorphosis into public conventions. In their conceptualization we have a totalized and absolute “truth,” one that is not subject to doubt or probability, but a “truth” of international politics waiting to be explored and employed in the service of America’s vital interests, and harnessed to a policy of democratization for the sake of US security and stability.

Thus neoconservatives view democratization as a tool to enhance US security and *structural* democratization as the way forward. Endorsing the structural theories of democratic peace influenced the means of achieving democratization as it entails the use of the military. [2] If democratizing other countries and drawing them into the zone of peace is a vital US interest, then this interest has to be attained even against intense resistance. Furthermore, the neoconservative’s understanding of democracy as mainly a structure, composed of periodical elections and checks and balances, enables them to think of democratization as an act of building along a general set of guidelines that can be applied from above and outside. On this account, it is reasonable to expect the success of democratization at bayonet point. It should not even take much effort. After all, a democratizing military occupation unleashes the universal aspiration for freedom in citizens. They will cooperate with the occupation in building a democratic structure while the occupying army establishes the right conditions for such reforms, and then delegates greater responsibility to local elites.

George W. Bush, who started his presidency as almost an isolationist, went into hiding during the aftermath of the uncertainties on that tragic day of September 11, 2001, and reemerged as a new president with new concerns and a new understanding of US security problems. He sought a new agenda and new strategy that would enable him to confront the reconceived threat of terrorism—and this he found in the lessons preached by the neoconservatives.

The latter were well positioned to exploit the administration's confusion and to convince President Bush of their ideas. They used political representations of the democratic-peace thesis to convince the President along with the American public that democratization was the key to American security. They repeatedly stressed the academic support for the thesis, thus rhetorically invoking scientific objectivity to urge an ideological agenda.

To be sure, good marketing and a neoconservative persuasion were not the sole reasons for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. However, the democratic-peace thesis, with its reputation for objectivity, President Bush's self-proclaimed democratic commitment, and the country's sense of confusion, rage, and urgency, combined to help democracy promotion become the backbone of the new Bush doctrine. This was especially true regarding the Middle East, and is evident not only from the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, but also from the Roadmap, with its insistence on structural democratic reforms in the Palestinian Authority; the Greater Middle East and North Africa project of building a democratic alliance, and the United States National Security Strategy of September 17, 2002, which institutionalized democracy promotion as the main strategy for fighting global terrorism in order "to create a balance of power that favors human freedom" (White House, 2002: Foreword).

Thus, the democratic-peace thesis was used for reasons contrary to its original raison d'être, which was to identify a hidden force for peace. For democratic-peace theoreticians, and first among them Dean Babst (1964), their work had at last achieved the main goal of International Relations—to find a cure for war. And yet the public conventions and political convictions of the democratic-peace thesis were used to obstruct (among many obstructions) the Israeli–Palestinian peace process and cause (one of several causes) the United States to fight a distant war far from home; a war that, as the current events show, brought Iraq and the Middle East neither democracy nor domestic stability or regional peace.

The Theoretician as Organic/Universal Intellectual

Those events and processes demonstrate that even if theoreticians have potential to serve as responsible intellectual, they do not always materialize it. Moreover, the way theoreticians usually theorize curtails the potential to serve as intellectuals. The ethos and ethics of objectivity restrain the incentives to be involved in the world outside academia, and limit the possibilities to take upon oneself the role of intellectual. This last observation raises the normative question of the responsibilities of theoreticians for the real-world ramifications of their theories. This question touches upon the issue of the political agency of theoreticians, of them acting as intellectuals. As described so far, democratic peace theoreticians lacked political agency and didn't act as intellectuals. But that doesn't mean that they cannot and should not assume responsibilities for their theories' fate and to act as intellectuals who can benefit society.

Scanlon writes on "substantive responsibility" (1998), the things people are required to do for each other. Theoreticians are not above substantive responsibility, and as it binds other people, so it binds them towards the wider society they are members of. Substantive responsibility dictates theoreticians to use their command of ideas to the benefit of society and it includes advancing their (potential) capacity to act as organic (or universal) intellectuals. Insofar as theoreticians work with ideas, and moreover with beneficial ideas, they are bound by substantive responsibility to share it out among the wider society; to act, that is, as organic (or universal) intellectuals.

We now reach the last of the three questions: are the theoreticians bound to act as organic intellectuals and advance sectarian interests of this class or the other, or can they transcend their own sectarianism and act as the Hegelian universal class? Or, to put it in more Gramscian terms, can they be universal intellectuals? We should remember, following feminist standpoint epistemology, that all knowledge—theoretical knowledge included—is situated both socially and politically; all knowledge, that is, is embedded in the position of the knower in the social hierarchy and her/his ensuing social and political commitments (Tickner, 2005). As such, theoreticians are to some extent class-based and susceptible to be—knowingly or unknowingly—organic intellectuals and to advance sectarian interest.

This is indeed true, but it is only part of the truth. The obverse characteristic of the academic production of knowledge is that it is a search for truth, one that is defined in universalistic terms. There is a genuine sincerity in this search for universal truth. Beyond the sincerity there are some methodological measures that guarantee an open-

ended process of inquiry characterized by universality, even if conducted from sectarian standpoints. Obviously there is a real tension between the universality and particularity. But tensions are part and parcel of social reality, and when accompanied by the academic culture of reflexivity and criticism it can be a fruitful tension; a fruitful tension that ensures the co-existence of universalism and sectarianism, and facilitates a true potential for theoreticians to act as the Hegelian universal class and as universal intellectuals. In my book I use the term theoretician-citizen, to emphasize the democratic importance of this function and its participatory and deliberative aspects. Theoreticians as universal intellectuals and theoretician-citizens strive to bring about a better and peaceful society, a society in which sectarian conflicts are embedded within universal acceptance and stability. Theoreticians, that is, can and should act as universal intellectuals and theoretician-citizens, offering their undistorted theoretical constructions as tools for enriching and invigorating public deliberation, democracy, and peace.

Notes

[1] He returned to the post of Prime Minister in 2009, though by then abandoned the rhetorical misuses of the democratic-peace thesis.

[2] The structural theories of democratic peace emphasize democratic structure as the cause of peace while the normative theories emphasize democratic norms and values as the causes.

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