Kant, Doyle, and the Democratic Peace Thesis: A Postcolonial Critique

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Immanuel Kant's work on international politics has been given renewed emphasis by Michael W. Doyle in his two-part article *Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs* (1983). The article establishes continuity between the Kantian project and modern liberal thought in International Relations (IR); in particular, Doyle finds his democratic peace thesis — the fact that liberal democracies do not wage war against one another — to be consistent with Kant's three Definitive Articles for perpetual peace. On closer inspection, however, the similarities between the two theories fades. This essay adopts a critical, postcolonial outlook to challenge Democratic Peace Theory (DPT) on two grounds: first, to demonstrate that it offers, at best, a very much distorted interpretation of Kant's original predicaments; second, to denounce the illiberal, imperialist character produced by such a distortion. DPT's theoretical profile will prove much closer to the liberalism of John Stuart Mill; in other words, to a broadly racist, Eurocentric perspective. Ultimately, this essay argues that DPT fails to incorporate a Kantian philosophy to produce an effective and coherent theory of progress; its imperialist underpinnings impede progress if not actively contribute to the perpetuation of international conflict.

The essay is divided into four sections. In the first section, I introduce the main theoretical concerns of postcolonial theory. This will allow for a critical approach to the Eurocentric character of the international order and, in particular, to the modern liberal agenda. I also specify what is meant by the otherwise loose term "imperialism" by formulating three criteria. In the second section, I summarise the most relevant principles of DPT. In the process, I demonstrate that DPT matches the three criteria of imperialism. Successively, I revise Kant's three Definitive Articles for perpetual peace in the third section. The comparison with DPT will reveal that not only does it misrepresent Kant's ideas, it also works in a direction that is opposite to them. Finally, having decoupled Kant and DPT, I establish a connection between the latter and the liberalism of John Stuart Mill. This analytical process is intended to stimulate modern liberal thinkers in general, and DPT theorists in particular, to engage in self-criticism and to become much more responsive to the aim of progress.

Postcolonialism and the Modern Liberal Agenda in International Relations

Postcolonial theory reveals the Eurocentric character of IR in two important ways. First, it engages with history, which is otherwise too often neglected in the discipline. Specifically, it investigates the historical foundation of the modern international order. The mainstream narrative in this respect suggests that it developed within Europe to then spread to the other continents. The European system, formalised by the Westphalia settlement, progressively expanded outwards; the Industrial Revolution empowered Europeans with economic and technological superiority vis-à-vis non-Europeans, which was readily employed to propagandise the European capitalist model abroad. Ultimately, the Europeans brought progress and modernity to the foreign peoples (Seth, 2011: 169-170). Needless to say, this narrative is problematic. To begin with, it diminishes the horrors of the European expansion, such as bloody conquests, genocides, exploitation and oppression, as secondary developments within a much broader picture. Postcolonialism argues that this is not the case; rather, such developments were central to the foundation of the modern international order. For instance, one of its defining properties, capitalism, unlikely emerged solely from inter-European trade. Much more plausible is that the conquest of the Americas – thus the importation of new raw materials – and the transatlantic slave trade enabled it to emerge in the first place (Seth, 2011: 171-174). It is critical

to appreciate the importance of these global interconnections, or else the modern international order will continue to be associated with "a colonial anthropology in which a mythical righteous West poses as teacher for others" (Grovogui, 2013: 251).

The second way in which postcolonial theory reveals the Eurocentric character of IR is by questioning the nature of the procedural rules of interaction among states. As the world was becoming increasingly globalised in the second half of the nineteenth century, it was vital to regulate the interactions among free peoples in the public domain. The solution rested in the distinction between "substance" and "procedure". The new international order had to be inclusive, rather than exclusive: it would maintain cultural diversity and establish a horizontal relationship among states. At the same time, it would produce value-free (procedural) norms, devoid of any content or particularity, to regulate interactions. Liberalism emerged as the triumphant face of this new international order (Seth, 2011: 174-176). The issue is soon established: "far from being neutral…the procedural norms adopted presupposed, and thus favoured, Christian values over other values, men over women and so on" (Seth, 2011: 176). For instance, as critics point out, international law emerged in Europe to then expand outwardly. Similarly, norms and practices of diplomacy were established in Europe but were extended to the rest of the world nonetheless. It is very hard to believe that these procedural norms, which are so connected to their European origins, are devoid of any cultural particularity. Nor it is acceptable to believe that, only because the rest of the world has in fact largely complied with them, such norms can be regarded as truly universal (Seth, 2011: 177).

These two premises allow for a critical approach to modern liberalism in IR. We want to ask ourselves: has the West any right to pose as teacher for others? Are Western values truly universal and, if not, should they be? The post-1989 era begs these questions; it is in fact defined by a resurgence of Western paternalism, as the end of the Cold War presented the "opportunity for universalizing Western civilization so as to 'help and rescue' Eastern societies" (Hobson, 2012: 286). This is a period marked by a strong degree of optimism and Western triumphalism, characterised by the widespread assumption that the universalisation of Western civilisation and norms is a progressive good that will benefit *all* peoples. Modern liberals are careful to characterise the post-1989 era as a distinct one in the history of liberal thought, where new progressive and egalitarian values such as democracy, multiculturalism and human rights have taken on the liberal agenda. They want to avoid any association with the post-1830 era of *manifest* Eurocentric liberal international thought, which is "reimagined as more racially intolerant and imperialist than it was so that the post-1989 era can be portrayed as more culturally tolerant and anti-imperialist than it is" (Hobson, 2012: 285-286). Ironically, as Hobson (2012: 286) observes, modern liberal thought in IR "has become possibly more imperialist since 1989 than it was in the nineteenth century". This essay will demonstrate that this is the case.

First, however, it is necessary to define what makes a certain political thought "imperialist". I borrow Jahn's (2005: 177-178) characterisation, which defines "imperialist" any political thought that involves three elements: (1) a justification for interventions aimed at changing the cultural, political and economic structures of a target state; (2) a readiness to intervene even when the consent of the target society is lacking; (3) a principled approval of the use of military force to bring about change. The next section will demonstrate that DPT matches all three of these criteria.

Democratic Peace Theory and Imperialism

A brief summary of DPT is essential to understand why it matches the three criteria of imperialism. Doyle (1983a: 206-212; see also Jahn, 2005: 180-181) essentially defines liberal states by the freedom and equality of citizens, a representative government and private property. Statistically, he finds that such states "have yet to engage in war with one another", whereas they do at times go to war against non-liberal states (Doyle, 1983a: 213). For Doyle (1983a: 225-232), Kant's *Perpetual Peace* "offers the best guidance" to comprehend this empirical finding. Because in liberal states citizens bear the burden of war, they are incentivised to avoid it; thus republics are generally inclined toward caution, in line with Kant's First Definitive Article. These states establish mutual trust via the sharing of norms and institutions, which allows for peaceful conflict resolutions. A "separate peace" is thus established among liberal states, in conformity with Kant's Federation of Free States, found in the Second Definitive Article. The "spirit of commerce", i.e. economic interdependence, strengthens this separate peace, as postulated in the Third Definitive Article.

The same principles that account for liberal peace explain the recurrence of war between liberal and non-liberal states. Because they do not share the same norms and institutions, non-liberal states cannot be trusted; rather, they are looked at with suspicion and expected to be aggressive. As Doyle (1986: 1162) explains, in relation to non-liberal states, "liberal states have not escaped from the insecurity caused by anarchy in the world political system considered as a whole". World peace thus becomes a matter of promoting liberal principles abroad: non-liberal states must be converted to liberalism to become part of the ever-expanding liberal "separate peace" (Doyle, 1983b: 325-326, 330-331; Jahn, 2005: 181; Russett, 2013: 101). In Russett's (2013: 111) words: "promoting democracy…offers the possibility of strengthening existing peaceful relations and expanding their scope to most of the world". Non-liberal states, on the other hand, have no right to non-interference as they "do not authentically represent the rights of individuals" (Doyle, 1986: 1162). Crucially, then, while liberal states respect norms of sovereignty and non-intervention among themselves, they are not willing to guarantee the same rights to the non-liberal ones. The latter are given what Hobson (2012: 289) refers to as a "conditional status" based on the degree to which they respect human rights; as he also stresses, conditional sovereignty is a vital pre-requisite for Western neo-imperialist interventions. Accordingly, Cavallar (2001: 241) is sceptical about the liberal justification for interventions against non-liberal states. How many times, he seems to be asking, were liberal foreign policies driven by cultural prejudices and ideological convictions, as opposed to the noble respect for human rights? After all, DPT implies that interventionism should ultimately lead to the "teleological" evolution of non-Western societies into the idealised Western liberal societies (Hobson, 2012: 288).

Another important question comes to the fore: is the consent of the target society required for the promotion of liberalism abroad? Although Doyle does not explicitly address this issue, Jahn (2005: 181-182) offers a persuasive answer. Since, for Doyle, liberal constitutions derive their legitimacy from consent, the lack of consent proper of non-liberal states automatically translates into a lack of legitimacy. This construction implies that the populations of non-liberal states would, in principle, embrace a liberal constitution, but that they are prevented from doing so by way of autocratic oppression, non-liberal cultural traditions, or a lack of exposure to the advantages of liberal life. Consent, then, is not a requisite for liberal intervention.

Lastly, liberal interventionism toward non-liberal states rests largely on a formal rejection of the use of military force. Doyle (1983b: 335) warns his readers of the counterproductive effects that the deployment of the military abroad might have on domestic security; ironically, he also demonstrates that liberal states have recurred to military force multiple times in the past. Russett (2013: 111), too, asserts that liberal states should promote democracy "but rarely imposing it by force, and then only in response to aggression". Yet, the exclusion of the use of force is dictated by prudence. Doyle does not formulate any normative constraint on the use of force, any principled categorical rejection. Therefore, even though liberals are not enthusiastic about it, the use of military force remains an available option that cannot be excluded *a priori* (Jahn, 2005: 182).

Evidently, then, DPT matches all three of the criteria that make a political thought imperialist. Doyle works out a way to justify interventions toward non-liberal states without the consent of the target society and leaving open the possibility for the use of military force. He claims this to be consistent with the Kantian project for perpetual peace, but is it really?

The Kantian Project for Perpetual Peace and Democratic Peace Theory

Kant lays out three Definitive Articles in his masterwork *Perpetual Peace*. In a nutshell, the Articles prescribe republicanism, federalism and cosmopolitanism: these are the elements that, coordinated amongst themselves, would lead to progress and perpetual peace. As we have seen, Doyle claims continuity between these Articles and his democratic peace thesis. Let us now establish if this is really the case by looking at each Article in greater detail.

First Definitive Article

The First Definitive Article establishes that "the Civil Constitution of Every State shall be Republican" (Kant, 1991b [1795]: 99). Kant intends the republican constitution to guarantee freedom, equality and justice to all citizens by way of "a separation of the executive and legislative and … some degree of representation" (Hurrell, 1990: 195; Kant,

1991b [1795]: 99-102). On a pragmatic level, a republican constitution makes the prospect of war less likely, as the citizens, who are themselves self-legislators, would have "great hesitation in embarking on so dangerous an enterprise" (Kant, 1991b [1795]: 100). Kant presupposes the desire for happiness in all human beings; this is why republican citizens, who would themselves pay the costs, either in form of death, injury or economic struggle, tend to avoid the miseries of war. Two qualifications follow.

First, we must assume that Kant intends republican citizens to avoid *all* wars, regardless of the nature of the war or the regime type of the opponent (Cavallar, 2001: 233). Second, we must assume that in a truly republican state, in order for it to be functional to the aim of peace, *all* citizens must bear the burden of war. Doyle's liberal states hardly display such characteristics. As we have seen, Doyle argues that liberal states do not wage war against each other, but that they do sometimes wage war against non-liberal states. Moreover, in modern democracies not all citizens bear the burden of war. Usually only a small section of the population – young males – gets involved in war. Many citizens even benefit from war. Besides, the empirical record is plenty of cases where liberal democracies supported war, most notoriously in World War I. Since all republican citizens must bear the costs of war, they all should logically be allowed to vote via universal suffrage. Doyle is instead satisfied with 30% male suffrage, thus he enlists the French Republic of 1790-1795 and the post-1776 United States as liberal democracies (Cavallar, 2001: 237-238).

Let us make another important consideration. Kant clearly expected republican constitutions to arise out of an internal political process. The population would channel the "unsocial sociability" proper of all humans to embrace the civil constitution that, when confronted with all the other options, is the most appropriate to permit the fullest moral development, in accordance with nature's design (Kant, 1991a [1784]: 44-47). Put simply, the republican constitution rests on the consent of the population. As Jahn (2005: 189) observes, Kant did not believe that the republican constitution could be established by external interference. He is very explicit about non-intervention in the Fifth Preliminary Article, where he claims that "no state shall forcibly interfere in the constitution and government of another state" (Kant, 1991b [1795]: 96). This Article is of the strictest sort, to be respected under all circumstances; a "principle of equality" must regulate international behaviour. While critics have interpreted Kant as if he justifies intervention in cases of totalitarian *coup d'états* or grave disrespect of human rights, the textual evidence runs in the opposite direction (Cavallar, 2001: 240-242; Hurrell, 1990: 200). Hence, on closer inspection, Doyle's assertions fall apart: liberal democracies do not correspond to Kant's republics, nor are they allowed to intervene against non-liberal states.

Second Definitive Article

The Second Definitive Article asserts that "the Right of Nations shall be based on a Federation of *Free* [my emphasis] States" (Kant, 1991b [1795]: 102). Doyle clearly equates the word "free" with the republican constitution. So, his argument runs, a liberal domestic constitution is a requisite for membership in Kant's confederation. After all, he only admits liberal states in what he calls the "pacific union". Did Kant really mean the pacific confederation to be an exclusive one? Two considerations disprove it. First, as MacMillan (2006: 62) points out, Kant employs the word "free" to refer to status rather than form. That is, freedom corresponds to independence and sovereignty rather than to a specific regime type. Further, freedom is just one of the three principles proper of a republican constitution (the other two are the dependency of all citizens on a common legislation and legal equality), therefore they cannot be logically synonymous. Second, Kant never specifies that non-liberal states shall be excluded from the pacific confederation. True, he refers to a "powerful and enlightened" republic that would provide the "focal point for federal association among other states" (Kant, 1991b [1795]: 104), yet those "other states" are not also explicitly expected to be republican (Cavallar, 2001: 244; MacMillan, 2006: 63).

While Kant seems to have in mind a pact of mutual non-aggression, a collective security agreement open to *all* states regardless of regime type, well aware that international anarchy jeopardises peace and moral development, Doyle predicates an exclusive club of liberal states, a "separate peace" (Hurrell, 1990: 183-184). This implies a strong division between liberal and non-liberal states, which ultimately results in the perpetuation of the security dilemma. As Hurrell (1990: 193) readily notices, "Unless such a federation is able to become truly universal, its effect is merely to rearrange the units within the international anarchy, rather than overcome that anarchy". Doyle's argument, then, is not consistent with Kant's: one is trying to overcome the international anarchy, the other is merely reconfiguring the

security dilemma.

Third Definitive Article

The Third Definitive Article states that "Cosmopolitan Right shall be limited to Conditions of Universal Hospitality" (Kant, 1991b [1795]: 105). Kant considers the transnational barriers to peace and establishes that a refusal of interaction must not lead to the death of the applicant. While he believes in the pacifying potential of trade, he is critical of the commercial states of his time, namely Britain and the Netherlands, the interests of which are seen as a source of imperialism that leads to injustice and the perpetuation of war (Kant, 1991b [1795]: 105-108). The imperialist character of such commercial states spurs from the assumed "right to trade", imposed on others. Kant, however, is actually limiting that very right, since cosmopolitan law only allows for the right to hospitality and presumes that trade and other forms of interaction are moral only if "entered into voluntarily by all parties" (Jahn, 2005: 192, 191-192).

Doyle, like many other liberals in IR, obscures Kant's idea of cosmopolitan right by associating it with liberal economic theory. He insists that a free market economy is a defining feature of liberal democracies, and that economic interdependence is one of the explanations for why liberal states do not wage war against each other. Actually, however, Kant decouples commerce from hospitality and does not regard it as either a necessary or a sufficient element for perpetual peace. After all, his Third and Fourth Preliminary Articles are quite at odds with liberal economic principles (Simpson, 2019: 115, 119). Nonetheless, DPT and other liberal theories of IR insist on promoting the opening of new markets abroad. They support bilateral and multilateral agreements, such as the World Trade Organisation and the International Monetary Fund, which, despite being formally voluntary, can be seen as being actually "imposed" given the desperate economic dependence of many developing states (Jahn, 2005: 192). As Hobson (2012: 290-291) suggests, globalisation is today an opportunity for liberal states to assimilate non-liberal societies and universalise the liberal economic model. Doyle embraces this opportunity emphasising commerce over hospitality, clearly ignoring Kant's concerns on imperialism.

Mill's Legacies in Democratic Peace Theory

The previous section has demonstrated that DPT cannot claim continuity with the Kantian project for perpetual peace. I now proceed to argue that DPT is actually much more closer to the liberalism of John Stuart Mill (Jahn, 2005: 194-198).

Mill's political thought is explicitly driven by racism and provides a justification for imperialism. To begin with, Mill identifies four stages of development in history: savagery, slavery, barbarism and modern civilisation. The latter is defined by private property and widespread intelligence; savages, he explains, lack these elements to constitute the polar opposites of civilised people (Mill, 1977a [1836]: 120-122). Crucially, for Mill, the stage of development is connected to the form of government, the highest of which is Britain's representative government: "As … [peoples] range lower and lower in development, that form of government will be, generally speaking, less suitable to them" (Mill, 1977b [1861]: 413). Similarly, Doyle explicitly defines liberal democracy as the best form of government; he too establishes a separation, between liberal and non-liberal states, which rests on regime type.

Mill's separation of modern civilization from the other stages of development begs two considerations. First, that not all states benefit from equal rights. The right to sovereignty is allocated depending on the degree to which a state reciprocates norms of international behaviour. Barbarians are clearly deemed incapable of such a thing; therefore, Mill explains, they "have no rights as a *nation*, except a right to such treatment as may, at the earliest possible period, fit them for becoming one" (Mill, 2006 [1859]: 259). Doyle, too, is willing to recognise another state's rights to sovereignty and non-intervention based on the degree to which it complies with international law. As we have seen, modern liberals in IR concede a "conditional status" to the non-liberal ones based, above all, on the degree to which they respect human rights (Hobson, 2012: 288-290).

Second, Mill believes that barbarous states would benefit from intervention; in his words: "nations which are still barbarous have not got beyond the period during which it is likely to be for their benefit that they should be conquered

and held in subjection by foreigners" (Mill, 2006 [1859]: 259). This mirrors quite well Doyle's thought. For him, intervention is a means to bring democracy to a foreign society and, most importantly, to enlarge the liberal "separate peace". As pointed out above, modern liberals assume that the target society would, in principle, embrace liberal ideals, therefore we can think of interventions as a way to speed up the process of democratisation for the benefit of the foreign peoples. Given these considerations, it is much easier to establish parallels between Mill and DPT than it is to see continuity between Kant and the latter.

Conclusion

A postcolonial outlook has proved useful to identify the imperialist elements of DPT. Doyle's theory, as we have seen, diverges substantially from Kant's to justify interventions in non-liberal states even when the consent of the local population is lacking and possibly with the use of military force. The postcolonial considerations on the foundations and workings of the modern international order are strengthened by DPT, which does after all conceive the West as a moral teacher for others and the universalisation of Western civilisation and norms as a progressive good for all.

This essay is meant to stimulate modern liberals in IR to engage in self-criticism. Evidently, a failure on the part of DPT to incorporate Kant to produce a coherent and effective theory of progress – and the close association with Mill's imperialist political thought – is way too problematic. Kant invites his readers to embrace the prospect of progress advocating the abolition of *all* wars and the resolution of the problem of international anarchy. By misinterpreting Kant's message, Doyle actually works in the opposite direction. He does not condemn all wars, nor the use of military force; most importantly, he rearranges the security dilemma, leaving non-liberal states under the constant threat of war. This generates, by his own admission, "tremendous suffering" (Doyle, 1986: 1163). As interventionism is conceived as a denial of self-determinism, the result is radicalisation, intolerance and fragile security (Jahn, 2007: 89). Up to date, therefore, DPT proves inconsistent with the aim of progress. Not only do its imperialist underpinnings impede progress, they also actively contribute to the perpetuation of war. Crucially, modern liberalism in IR must renounce its imperialist foundations if it desires to achieve progress in line with Kant's hopes.

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