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REVIEWS

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LUIGI CARANTI, *KANT'S POLITICAL LEGACY:
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Although it is true, as is stated in the introduction to the book, that Kant's political philosophy has served as the inspiration for the foundation of important political devices in the course of the previous century, essentially after the Second World War (human rights, the United Nations, the continental blocs, etc., the development of a humanitarian language in general), it is also true that the reception of Kant was the product of two clearly isolated agencies. These are, on the one hand, the academic world, concerned centrally with hermeneutic questions, often innocuous from the practical point of view, and, on the other, the public in general, which, in view of the application of Kant's thought, has frequently used his ideas with little theoretical exactitude and, for this very reason, failed to take advantage of the conceptual riches which would be offered by an attentive and careful reading of its sources. From this point of view, the book is presented as a point of communication between these two hitherto separate spheres of reception. Thus, its objective is not only to offer a coherent vision of Kant's political philosophy on the basis of a detailed analysis of the sources, but, in addition, to elucidate the theoretical tools which are to be found in his thought with which we can confront at the global level the

great political challenges of our century. The book is a resource for the specialists alone but also for political agents who aim to take intelligent action in the search for peace and the defence of human rights. It is a hermeneutically careful interpretation of Kant's political philosophy which is, at the same time, sharp and committed to the problems of our times.

The book is divided into three Parts (I. Human Rights, II. Peace and III. Progress), which are divided, in turn, into three Chapters each. The different theoretical frameworks used, the discussions into which the book intervenes, and the hypothesis developed in each Part are stated clearly in the Introduction. This thus offers a rapid and useful overview of the most important contents of the book.

In Part I, "Human Rights", the problematic of this type of "right" is analysed, the most important questions are determined, and the "justification problem" is described, together with the different responses to this question which we have at present. In this context, Caranti makes Kant intervene in the discussion through the reconstruction of the elements which are fruitful for a "strong" justification of human rights, without for that reason falling into dogmatism or a "simple-minded humanism". In relation to the problems

associated with a certain “occidentalism” into which the defence of human rights could fall, the author shows that Kant’s political philosophy provides us with a sane and pertinent combination – which enables us to confront those problems – of the universalism of the principles with a particularism in the application of those principles. Towards the end of this first Part, the author develops an argument about human rights which, although inspired by Kant, distances itself from him on several important points.

According to the author’s argument, although Kant did not and could not know the technical term “human rights”, it is possible to offer a reconstruction of a justification of this kind of right on the basis of an analysis of the grounding which the philosopher gives to the inborn “right to external freedom”. Kant would have defended a conception of human rights (that is, the inborn “right to external freedom”) through a substantive conception of “human dignity”, based, not merely on practical liberty (as a faculty of choosing between alternative actions), but rather on the concept of autonomy (as “the ability to act under self-imposed moral constraints”, p. 57). According to Caranti, autonomy appears as a privileged basis of the concept of human dignity, as a foundation which serves both common sense and “all mayor cultural traditions and revealed religions” (p. 57). In the face of other solutions to the “justification problem” which the author presents and discusses in detail, the Kantian proposal is offered as the most solid alternative. However, with the end of making the Kantian justification of the concept of “human rights” (that is of the “right to external freedom”) even more inclusive and modern, the author proposes two important modifications. In the first place, he argues that we must accept (against Kant) that not only human beings, but also the animals, act morally, with a certain degree of autonomy and are, because of this, worthy of respect and the subjects of rights. In the second place, distancing himself again from the literal meaning of Kant, who, as is known, bases the concept of autonomy

on the “categorical imperative”, the author proposes underpinning the concept of autonomy with any general principle which could function as an original grounding of moral decision. That is, it could be supported not only by the categorical imperative, but also by some principle inspired, for example, by the Aristotelian concept of the ethical life or even the “Golden Rule” (one of whose formulations would read, “Do unto others as you would wish them to do unto you”, p. 64), etc.

With respect to Caranti’s second proposal, I would like to make one observation. Kant bases his concept of autonomy on the respect for the categorical imperative as the consequence of strong internal reasons. In particular, through the strictly formal character of this principle Kant guarantees that it belongs exclusively to reason and thus guarantees that no external content or end interferes with moral determination. Rational beings are autonomous when they act out of respect for the categorical imperative because they do so in relation to a principle which has its source in pure practical reason. Now, if autonomy is guaranteed, as Caranti wants it to be, through the determination to act in conformity with any general principle, we are confronted with an undesirable alternative: if the principle in question is not given to the agent by reason, but rather they must decide it voluntarily, the question arises of the *lack of a criterion* for deciding between general moral principles. The consequence is that the decision to subordinate oneself to one general principle or another appears arbitrary. If, on the other hand, the principle in question is given to the agent, not by means of their reason, but rather, for example, through culture, the state or religion, it becomes difficult to maintain an acceptable concept of “autonomy”. This second alternative also brings the difficulty that it does not permit us to establish a sharp division between moral determination mediated by, for example, the Golden Rule and by a morally perverse principle, such as the determination to act in accordance with the will of the Führer in Nazi Germany. Although the author’s proposal

makes Kantian morals more flexible and more suitable to our contemporary vision of the moral life – this is unquestionably a major effort – this point should be qualified. It is not a question of satisfying specifically Kantian requirements, but rather those of anyone who seeks to defend a consistent concept of “moral autonomy”.

Part II, “Peace”, analyses the “Democratic Peace Theory” (DPT). Initially developed by the political philosopher Michael Doyle in “Kant, Liberal Legacies and Public Affairs” during the nineteen eighties, this has had a far-reaching influence in the present. One of the central theses of this theory which, according to Doyle, would have been announced by Kant long before it could be proved empirically, is the directly proportion relationship between democracy and peace. Although there are different variants of the DPT, which Caranti describes and discusses, in general, the central point defended within this framework is that, for 200 years, that is to say, since their very birth, the liberal democracies (the “republics”, in Kantian terminology) have not entered into nor have had to enter into war with each other. The objective of this section of the book is to weigh up the problems and defects of the DPT through an analysis of the tract, *To Perpetual Peace* (1795), and of the different critiques which have been made of this theory from a conceptual and historical point of view. (In fact, as the author recognizes, the DPT is challenged by multiple and important counterexamples from the nineteenth century to the present.) The three permanent conditions of peace (republicanism, federalism and cosmopolitan right) outlined by Kant in the tract of 1795, read carefully, offer, according to the author, a valuable resource for a more solid DPT. In Caranti’s reading, it is not just a question of the fact that the three conditions must function *jointly* so as to guarantee peace, as Doyle argues, but also of *understanding them correctly*. Thus, the author offers an interpretation of those conditions which he contrasts with that offered by the defenders of the DPT. Unlike the reading which the latter

defend, Caranti offers one which contains the following points. First, the republic must be distinguished from “liberal democracy”: the latter watches over the particular interests of the individuals, while in the former the equal status of the citizens is protected. Second, the federation of the nations must be considered a league not only of republican but also non-republican states. Finally, foreigners’ right to visit must be interpreted not merely as a “right to trade”, but also, in general terms, as a right to community or to society, or, inversely, as the obligation on the part of the states to guarantee the human rights of foreigners, a guarantee which would lead to the development of a global moral consciousness. Moreover, the author argues that the “right to trade” which would promote peace does not imply, according to Kant, the right to all forms of trade, but only to those forms of exchange which are fair for all the parties involved.

In this section the author shows how, understood properly, Kant’s political philosophy presents itself as a valuable resource for correcting a theory which has had a major impact in our times and, at the same time, for defining those fundamental guidelines which politicians ought to follow in order to promote peace. Particularly worthy of attention is the charge that Caranti makes at the end of this Part, according to which the DPT, even in the version refined by Doyle, would oscillate in a way which is “politically dangerous”. For Kant, as the author correctly argues, republicanism, federalism and the right to visit are *norms of action* which guarantee or supposedly lead to peace, but the DPT *moves* between a descriptive or explanatory theory about how relations are and have been between democratic (liberal) states, on the one hand, and a theory which *serves to justify certain wars*, that is, those which involve a supposedly undemocratic state, on the other. (The DPT functioned in this way in George W. Bush’s speeches during the war against Iraq but is also used in this way by Doyle himself [p.198], although with a different meaning from that of the former.)

Finally, Part III, “Progress”, analyses the Kantian conception of history presented both in the essay *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose* (1784) and in *To Perpetual Peace* (1795). It aims to establish and make credible the theoretical reasons for which, according to Kant, both greater respect for human rights and the establishment of peace can be expected in a nearer or more distant future.

On the basis of the tract of 1795, Caranti argues that the Kantian conception of historical progress could be vindicated if two conditions are observed. In the first place, the mechanism of the “unsocial sociability” has to be separated from what is for contemporary standards, according to the author, the highly problematic notion of “natural dispositions” (this is, Caranti’s “Separability Thesis”) and, in the second place, the conception of historical progress has to be studied in conjunction with the general premises of what, for Kant, human nature is. The prediction of human development towards progress is possible taking uniquely into consideration “certain constant feature[s] of human beings” (p. 210) such as, for example, “unsocial sociability” (p. 215), the “limited benevolence and ability to learn” (p. 216), or the “pursuit of happiness or self-love” (p. 233), and certain objective circumstances of the external world. The result is to offer a reconstruction of the argument for which, according to Kant, there are reasons – highly plausible according to present-day canons – to believe that a non-linear progress towards a cosmopolitan constitution (and therefore not its alternatives: regression or stagnation) is the most probable course of development in human affairs. Because of this, the author distances himself from the usual interpretations, according to which historical “progress” must be understood in a merely regulatory or even “practical” form. In line with this, the author analyses the First Supplement to the text of *To Perpetual Peace* (1795), in which Kant presents his much discussed “Guarantee Thesis” according to which “nature ensures that humans will one day achieve a condition of perpetual peace” (p. 218). Caranti offers

an interpretation of this affirmation which, by contrast with other readings, makes it not only compatible with Kant’s critical philosophy, but also epistemologically significant. In that Supplement Kant would not defend a teleology based on “nature or providence ends”, but rather a theory about the existing mechanisms by means of which progress towards the cosmopolitan condition can be forecast. In this way, Caranti reads the texts of 1784 and 1795 as being in harmony with each other.

Here, I would like to make an observation about the strategy of eliminating teleology from Kant’s conception of history. According to the point of view of the model of the development of nature which appears to have won the battle (Darwinism or some version of Darwinism), all reference to natural “ends” or “dispositions” (or “ends of providence”) must remain outside the realm of scientific discourse. In this context Caranti attempts to cleanse Kant’s history of philosophy of its teleological assumptions. He thus shows that his conception of historical progress is perfectly sustainable without those assumptions. Thus, the natural mechanism would be a concept sufficient for explaining human development even from a point of view which would have to be admitted by Kant himself. But we must note that, as the author demonstrates, according to Kant, the horizon of the natural mechanism would coincide with the *highest ends of reason*, the institution of a perfect civil constitution (a republic) in both its internal and external relations, perpetual peace, etc. Is this coincidence not just a little too happy? Should not this coincidence itself be the object of explanation? Is not this explanation, precisely, something which Kant’s teleological comprehension of history could offer us? However it may be, I think that underlying the author’s theoretical perspective is a tendency to consider all forms of teleological thought to be “dogmatic”, when in fact one of the great achievements of Kant’s critical philosophy is that of offering a “critical grounding” for that kind of reasoning. Perhaps not only some kind of Darwinism, but also social

and political theory could take advantage of a critically grounded teleological comprehension.

In the final Chapter of the last Part, history is approached from the point of view of the political agent and their interest in articulating their efforts towards progress, that is to say, in this context, towards perpetual peace. In particular, that section studies the nature of the prudent subordination of the political to the moral which is expected of the *moral politician*, a figure which, in Caranti's analysis condenses two fundamentals. On the one hand, it contains the thesis of the subordination of the political to the moral, and on the other, it accommodates the thesis of the primacy of politics, for the art of prudence which the *moral politician* exercises exceeds the moral and defines the sphere of autonomy proper to politics. Unlike the First Supplement of *To Perpetual Peace* in which, according to what we saw above in Caranti's interpretation, it is the "mechanism of nature" which leads to and guarantees peace, in the Appendix to the same text this role is exercised by the "the moral politician's good will and his free decision inspired by duty" (p. 242). This does not, however, make us fall into a contradiction. To the contrary, in Caranti's reading, we are confronted by two

complementary theses: the moral politician does not replace the labour of the natural mechanism, but rather accelerates or promotes that which nature does independently of the will of human beings. The *moral politician* (unlike the *political moralist* and, above all, the *moralizing politicians*, figures Caranti also analyses carefully), therefore, defines the responsibility which human beings, in general, and politics in particular, have in the face of the urgency of providing responses to the problems and challenges of our times.

Kant's Political Legacy: Human Rights, Peace, Progress is a book which is accessible to the general public, although it is profound and enriching in all its sections. It is structured well, contains intelligent argumentative strategies, includes an up to date literature and participates in a series of fundamental current debates. It offers important theses both for the field of Kant studies and for politicians, functionaries, and activists concerned with giving a solid theoretical grounding to the defence of human rights, the search for peace and the hope for progress. It opens a road to the renovation of the reception of "Kant's political legacy" which I hope will increase still more and diversify both within the academic world and outside of it.