Review

Kant's nonideal theory of politics

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In the past few decades, important scholarship has criticized the common caricature of Kant as an overly abstract philosopher interested only in idealized a priori claims. Against this received image, scholars have pointed to the hundreds of pages that Kant devoted to the empirical world in all its non-ideal imperfection, arguing that these, too, are philosophically insightful texts worth taking seriously. This scholarship has mostly focused on Kant's anthropology, but it has also explored his writings on education, religion, art, and history. *Kant's Nonideal Theory of Politics* extends this general approach into Kant's political theory, which Huseyinzadegan shows is not just a theory of right [*Recht*] that aims to deduce political goals a priori, but is at the same time a 'nonideal theory' concerned with 'the contingent variables of politics' (4). After the 'first part' of Kant's politics, an ideal theory telling us what its ultimate normative goals should be, there is a 'second part' (4), which addresses 'politically salient features of history, culture, and geography' (13). *Kant's Nonideal Theory of Politics* is an exploration of this under-appreciated and generally under-theorised layer of Kant's political theory.

It is essential that these two 'guiding threads' not be confused, as Huseyinzadegan thinks they often are. In fact, they constitute 'two types of theoretical endeavor' (3), having different aims and methods, and which operate according to distinct logics. Where the well-known ideal theory of *Recht* makes the kind of deductive universal claims familiar to readers of Kant's moral philosophy, its nonideal part, which has its roots in the philosophy of nature and the philosophy of history, mobilizes instead the hypothetical use of reason guided by the principle of purposiveness [*Zweckmässigkeit*]. This aspect of Kant's politics is not about justifying normative claims supposed to hold for any time or place, but instead concerns those domains where strict a priori cannot be reached. Kant famously understands history, nature, and culture in progressive and developmental terms, but this means that he needs a conceptual apparatus which does not abstract away from space and time if he is to have anything concrete to say about them. The

model for this regulative, teleological form of theorizing comes primarily from his account of organisms, and Huseyinzadegan has a lot of interesting things to say about Kant's extensive use of organic metaphors in his political writings—chapter 3 contains an innovative reading of 'What is Enlightenment?' that takes this as its theme.

Kant's Nonideal Theory of Politics develops an account of the systematic place of this nonideal layer within the architecture of Kant's thought as a whole. Alongside readings of political texts like 'Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim', 'What is Enlightenment?', 'Toward Perpetual Peace,' and *The Doctrine of Right*, Huseyinzadegan pays close attention to Kant's account of the 'hypothetical use of reason' in the Appendix to the *Critique of Pure Reason's* Transcendental Dialectic, methodological considerations found in 'What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?', and §§59, 65, and 82-84 of the *Critique of Teleological Judgment*. The carefully argued portions of the book dealing with these latter texts demonstrate that the nonideal theory with which *Kant's Nonideal Theory of Politics* is concerned is not sealed off within the writings on history, anthropology, and geography. From the first *Critique's* account of how we can bring particulars into a hypothetical unity through a *focus imaginarius* to the third *Critique's* investigation of a 'lawfulness of the contingent', Huseyinzadegan shows us that this other way of thinking comes from the critical core of Kant's system, and not just from its anthropological periphery. This distinguishes her position from the strain of scholarship I mentioned at the outset, which has argued for the philosophical value of Kant's writings on anthropology, education and so on, while generally preserving a hierarchical division between the critical project proper and the merely empirical parts of his corpus.

The first major payoff of this approach comes in the discussion of Kant's cosmopolitanism. Huseyinzadegan thinks that many philosophers and political theorists miss the distinction between these levels, and thereby interpret his cosmopolitanism as if it were an a priori political theory or, even worse, a moral ideal grounded in the categorical imperative. Cosmopolitanism is not in fact a normative goal of politics for Kant; better understood, it is a thesis on the philosophy of history. History presents any rational observer with a chaos of empirical data that must be organized in some way if she is to make any sense of it; Kant's cosmopolitanism can be understood as the claim that the course of history thus far points to the idea of a cosmopolitan world order as its *telos*. This hypothetical guiding principle, which is based on a tentative preliminary interpretation of history, can then be used to help us understand the movement of politics in the here and now. One can certainly make normative political claims on the basis of such an analysis, but that would be to do something other than Kantian cosmopolitanism, in the strict sense. The ideal portion of Kant's politics does have its own ultimate goal—peace, rather than cosmopolitanism—but because it comes out of a different discourse its claims have a different status.

This interpretation of cosmopolitanism has important implications for the ongoing debate about Kant's Eurocentrism, which is the second major payoff of Huseyinzaidegan's account. If Kant's cosmopolitanism is read as an a priori claim coming out of an ideal theory of politics, then it is tempting to use it as a weapon against his Eurocentrism. The problem, it can be argued, is that Kant didn't really follow through on his cosmopolitanism. He had a blinkered understanding of the actual course of world-history, which prevented him from being as truly cosmopolitan as his theory suggested he ought to have been. The solution to the problem of Eurocentrism, on this common interpretation, is more cosmopolitanism. In Huseyinzaidegan's analysis, however, the ordering between the a priori and the empirical components of Kant's story is reversed, which situates the problem within a deeper stratum of his thought than is implied by this tidy rejoinder. Once cosmopolitanism is understood in the regulative, teleological, and nonideal manner so thoroughly laid out in *Kant's Nonideal Theory of Politics*, one sees that it is not an a priori ideal that pre-exists the empirical matter to which it will be applied more or less successfully, but is actually the *result* of his interpretation of world-history. Eurocentrism, in other words, is *prior* to cosmopolitanism. Were one to somehow amend Kant's approach, filling in all the empirical detail he so scandalously left out, one would also have to revisit the question of whether history really does point to the idea of a cosmopolitan world order as its *telos*. If one is to abandon the interpretation of history put forward by the man who taught his students that 'humanity has its highest degree of perfection in the white race' (Kant 2012, 9: 316), then it certainly seems sensible to call into question the overarching political principle he derived from that analysis, too.

The main interpretive claims of *Kant's Nonideal Theory of Politics* are so tightly argued that it is difficult to see how they could be seriously challenged. The qualified defence of teleology is provocative and philosophically interesting, and the insistence on its importance for reading Kant absolutely essential (it should not be forgotten that the unity of mechanism and teleology that Kant is supposed to have achieved in his critical system was seen by many of his contemporaries as its most important accomplishment; one simply cannot understand Kant without it). *Kant's Nonideal Theory of Politics* is also a serious treatment of Kantianism's obvious problems, which does not try to downplay their significance. My only reservation is about how little is left of this political theory if one takes Huseyinzaidegan's criticisms completely on board. This is not an issue for the book inasmuch as it is a piece of Kant scholarship—after all, Kant is an enormously problematic figure whom scholars are under no obligation to defend—but it does seem to me to present difficulties inasmuch as it is pitched as a 'rescue operation' (16) aiming to secure a certain form of Kantianism against Kant himself (166). We are left with the undeniably important maxim that 'history matters for politics', which Huseyinzaidegan calls the 'central insight' of Kant's nonideal political theory (60), and some interesting reflections on the importance of teleology for politics and

history, but little beyond that. Whether or not this new, leaner political Kantianism is developed further by Huseyinzadegan or by others, this excellent book is sure to be cited often by critics of Kant's Eurocentrism, who can now point to many passages showing not only that his cosmopolitanism is seriously compromised, but also that the issues reach into the critical core of his work by way of the third *Critique*.

Reference

Kant, I. (2012) 'Physical Geography (1802)' in *Natural Science* ed. Eric Watkins trans. Olaf Reinhardt. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 434–679.

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