

Navigating Political Philosophy in the Twenty-first Century: Global Challenges and Theoretical Insights

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Abstract. This special issue explores new approaches in political philosophy that address many global challenges facing humanity, with particular attention to Kantian and post-Kantian methods along with their limitations. The idea for this issue was born from the 2019 European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) workshop “Kant on Political Change: Theoretical Grounds and Global Implications” held at the ECPR Joint Sessions at the Université Catholique de Louvain in Mons. The workshop was organised by the Kantian Political Thought Standing Group at the ECPR. Several papers in this issue are refinements from that cooperative endeavour, with inclusion of contributions that reflect a wide range of ways to approach Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy today.

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The four papers take a contemporary political problematic as their subject matter, and try to analyse it through a Kantian lens, also testing Kant’s relevance for our twenty-first century world. The authors do so by problematising outdated theoretical views in Kant (and in post-Kantians such as Rawls) and reflecting on the limitations and exclusions of the canon of political thought and of contemporary mainstream political philosophies. The authors assume responsibility, as global citizens and as scholars, for urgent matters such as climate change, the current situation of refugees and political exiles all over the world, and structural racism, aiming to develop theoretical grounds for addressing these challenges in a Kant-inspired way that is also aware of the limitations of Kant’s own thought.

1] That the themes of this issue, including the significance of Kant’s political philosophy for today, are of interest to scholars is clear from innovative work being currently published. See, for example, Pinheiro Walla and Demiry 2020 and Caranti and Pinzani 2022.

Mehmet Ruhi Demiray's paper, "The Incongruity Between Kant's Republicanism and His Conception of Sovereignty," initiates the special issue with a critique of the dominant liberal vision of cosmopolitan law, from the point of view of people who have lost their citizenship because of political persecution or civil war. Demiray problematises Kant's concept of sovereignty as attached to a particular person or group of persons (as if it were a Hobbesian-Kantian view on sovereignty), to defend the plausibility of a republican reading of Kant's political philosophy that dissolves the personalisation of sovereignty and ascribes it to the rule of law. He proposes that when reading Kant's political philosophy, we should avoid liberal conceptions of human rights modelled after natural law theories as well as interpretations that make Kant a radical democratic popular sovereignty theorist, and advances his own reading of Kant as an author of republican constitutionalism.

Drawing upon Hannah Arendt's work, he interprets Kant's distinction between *forma imperii* and *forma regiminis* as only working "if the forms of sovereignty are recast as the forms of despotism and a republic is considered as a form in which there is no place for a sovereign understood as a determinate office or person within the political-legal order." Kantian republicanism is useful for accounting for the situation and dignity of those who have lost their citizenship status, in so far as innate freedom is the precondition of having rights, not the result of them, and is protected, as opposed to endangered, by the rule of law.

Demiray highlights Kant's defence of metamorphosis in political change rather than violent palingenesis (Zachary Vereb's paper analyses this point in relation to our responsibility for climate change) and suggests that for Kant republic entails a future-oriented perspective that aims at the withering away of sovereignty. In a nutshell, Demiray's thesis is that the archaic notion of personalised sovereignty operates today when those in power persecute and discriminate, and also when the international human rights system is unable to provide a solution to those being persecuted and discriminated against. Kant's conception of the republic could show that the rule of law does not necessarily entail the appeal to this obsolete and damaging idea of sovereignty.

Huw Williams, in "Beyond Democracy Promotion: Kant, Rawls, and a Liberal Alternative," continues Demiray's train of reflections on humanitarian crises. Williams explores the international relevance of Kantian-inspired political philosophy, but this time through the critical reformist influence Rawls (in *Law of Peoples*) claimed to have drawn from *Perpetual Peace*. In doing so, Williams champions Rawls as an unlikely though valuable ally for normative guidance vis-à-vis international justice. His paper begins by outlining the post-9/11 democracy promotion paradigm, situating it alongside adventurist Kant-inspired readings in the field of international relations. After reflecting on the limitations of an aggressive, "hawkish" Kant dominating the literature, Williams then turns to alternative views of Kant, taking Alyssa Bernstein, among others, as an exemplar for a more "dove-like" interpretation.

Although his reading of Rawls' Kantianism remains squarely – and intentionally so – within the liberal discourse on democracy promotion, it at the same time argues (more radically) for its discontinuance along liberal lines. This is no doubt due to the paper's emphasis on liberal tolerance, non-interventionism, and non-paternalistic sustainable assistance. In the end, the Kantian-inspired Rawls that Williams sketches is well-suited to assist with the task of rethinking twenty-first century political issues, especially through the lens of foreign policy. Yet despite the merit of the more radical political reading of Rawls proposed by Williams, Macarena Marey in the subsequent paper exposes a problematic underbelly of Rawlsian philosophizing more generally.

In "On Onora O'Neill's Critique of Rawls, and on Rawls' non-Kantianism, with a little help from Charles W. Mills," Macarena Marey scrutinizes Rawls's Kantianism and his constructivism as developed out of *Justice as Fairness* and the *Dewey Lectures*. She does so in order to question the possibility of an alternative political reading of Kant, tempered through critical insights of the late Charles W. Mills. After reconstructing O'Neill's objections that call into doubt Rawls' Kantianism, Marey argues that Kant's strategy in *political* philosophy does not succumb to the same idealisation worries. There, Kant does not begin with the idealised individual. Instead, as Marey suggests, he takes as his point of departure social interactivity and its normative consequences.

Marey is concerned to show the compatibility of Kant's political philosophy with non-ideal frameworks. Her approach, in this respect, showcases the value of Kant's thought for global justice issues. Yet, as Marey cautions, Kant can only be an asset for these issues if we confront his biases and examine how they reflect those of today. Marey concludes by drawing from Mills' own misgivings with Rawlsian constructivism, posing the reader a question: "If ideal theories like Rawlsian constructivism cannot account for structural injustices such as racism and sexism, could a Kantian approach to political issues avoid this serious theoretical and practical shortcoming?" Marey answers that a situated understanding of Kant as radical Westphalian critic promises to provide a more emancipatory reading. Her response also reminds scholars of the importance to critically evaluate ideas in the philosophical canon.

In the final paper, "Kant, Revolution, and Climate: Individual and Political Responsibility," Zachary Vereb recovers some points treated by Demiray and investigates the promise of Kantian thought for a related global issue: this time, not the injustices of racism, sexism, imperialism, and classism, but the injustices relating to conservatism in the face of climate change. Though these issues are interconnected, as scholarship in environmental justice attests, Vereb highlights that climate change urgently demands that we adopt the radical goal of profoundly transforming the way we inhabit the Earth if justice in our social relations is to be attained. Vereb proposes that there are at least two different ways of understanding "revolution" in the turn of phrase "green revolution," that have their parallels in Kant's theory of human progress: metamorphosis versus palingenesis. In the first sense, revolution means radical social, moral, and ethical change, a change from the roots up, not necessarily violent, and towards a better situation; in

the second sense, revolution denotes the violent destruction of the present but not necessarily towards a better situation.

From Kant, Vereb recovers the defence of metamorphic action to achieve sustainability by sustainable means, which does not imply this change will be slow. “The clock matters” emphasizes Vereb, but radical goals call for metamorphosis as it is a surer path than palingenesis (the traditional image of violent political revolution), which is always uncertain in terms of outcomes. Indeed, sustainability is a goal of a specific kind: it must be achieved by means such that they do not produce more violent and damaging disruptions to nature, non-human animals, humans, and social justice and peace. Action to achieve a sustainable way of living must not add to the unsustainability of our current system of production and consumption. Vereb’s insight is that Kant’s moral and political philosophy can contribute to developing this vision of the green revolution as metamorphic radical transformation: “The caricature of Kant’s view, whereby political change must be slow and linear, is mistaken. Just as the transformation of pupa to butterfly involves a qualitative shift, so also does Kantian political reform operate with non-linear thresholds; all that is needed to supersede a threshold is an evolutionary spark.”

At the end of the day, we hope the reader will find this special issue of *Public Reason* illuminating. If this collection of papers inspires readers to rethink the canon of political thought – whether this means finding new ways to apply ideas of the past, or by critically reassessing the cognitive and normative blind-spots of frameworks they rely upon – then the special issue will have done its job. However, this would never have been possible were it not for support along the way. We would therefore like to conclude by thanking those who have helped make this possible, including the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR), the ECPR Kantian Political Thought Standing Group, the Keele-Oxford-St Andrews Kantian Research Centre (KOSAK), and workshop organisers Sorin Baiasu and Jakub Szczępański (along with their helpful feedback). We would also like to thank workshop participants for fruitful discussions: Federica Basaglia, Stefano Lo Re, Ewa Wyrębska-Đermanović, and Amy Kings. Finally, we appreciate assistance from Christoph Hanisch, Sofie Möller, Timothy Waligore, and Ewa Wyrębska-Đermanović for their invaluable feedback.

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