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Kant and systemic theory: a reply to Weber

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I would like to thank Martin Weber for his interesting and thoughtful response to my article 'Waltz, Kant and Systemic Approaches To International Relations'.[1] I am aware of the intrinsically controversial nature of any comparison of Waltz and Kant, and am therefore grateful for the opportunity to respond formally to the criticisms that Weber makes. Weber raises doubts about interpreting Kant as a systems theorist, interpreting Kant as advocating a scientific approach, and my understanding of the role of world society in Kant's account of international relations respectively. I will respond to these criticisms in the order that the original article dealt with these three issues, dealing with Kant as a social scientist first before discussing international systems and the role of world society in Kant's theory.

Kant and social science

Weber argues that Kant cannot legitimately be read as developing a social science of international relations. However, there is ample textual evidence that Kant did anticipate precisely this possibility. Consider, for instance, the way in which Kant opens *An Idea For A Universal History With A Cosmopolitan Purpose*. Kant writes that:

> (w)hatever conception of the freedom of the will one may form in metaphysics, the will's manifestation in the world of phenomena, i.e. human actions, are determined in accordance with natural laws, as is every other natural event. History is concerned with giving an account of these phenomena, no matter how deeply concealed their causes may be, and allows us to hope that, if it examines the free exercise of human will *on a large scale*, it will discover a regular progression among freely willed actions. . . . Thus births, marriages and deaths do not seem to be subject to any rule since the free human will has such a great influence upon them; and yet the statistics for them in large countries prove that they are just as subject to natural laws as are changes in the weather, which in themselves are so inconsistent that their individual occurrence cannot be determined in advance, but which nevertheless as a whole do not fail as a whole to sustain the growth of plants, the flow of rivers, and other functions in uniform and uninterrupted course.[2]

[1] Ewan Harrison, 'Waltz, Kant And Systemic Approches To International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 28 (2002), pp. 143–62; Martin Weber, 'Keeping It Real? Kant And Systemic Approches to IR – A Reply To Harrison', *Review of International Studies*, 28 (2003), pp. 145–50.

[2] Immanuel Kant, 'An Idea For A Universal History With A Cosmopolitan Purpose', in H. Reiss (ed.), *Kant's Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 41.

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Later in the same essay, Kant draws parallels between the historical realm and an ecosystem such as that associated with a forest, or a physical system such as that determining the motion of the planets.[3] In *Perpetual Peace*, Kant affirms that his political project 'has objective reality', and states that it is guaranteed by 'the mechanical process of nature'.[4] Kant does consider 'providence' as a mechanism driving the plan of nature he envisages. However, he then rejects this possibility by arguing that:

> (i)n contexts such as this where we are concerned purely with theory and not with religion, we should also note that it is more in keeping with the limitations of human reason to speak of nature and not of providence, for reason, in dealing with cause and effect relationships, must kept within the possible bounds of experience.[5]

Kant explicitly draws analogies between the social and the natural world, and is openly asserting that scientific methods can and should be used to study both realms. This does not take Kant's political writings out of the historical context in which they were written. The idea of science was established within the intellectual circles of the Enlightenment with which Kant is associated.[6] Kant's knowledge of the scientific principles of his day is also clearly present in the above quotations. Thus an interpretation of Kant sensitive to the period in which he wrote strongly supports the view that he explicitly advocated what today we refer to as a social science of international relations.

Of course, Kant was well aware of the potential tension that exists between his assertion that a social science of international relations is possible and his moral philosophy that stresses individual freedom. Thus he asks 'how does nature help to promote . . . [mankind's] *moral purpose* . . . and how does nature guarantee what man *ought* to do . . . (but does not do) will in fact will be done through nature's compulsion, without prejudice to the free agency of man?'.[7] However, Kant resolves this apparent paradox by conceptualising international relations as an open system subject to transformation through cultural change, rather than a closed system operating through strictly mechanical laws. In the language of contemporary debates, Kant is proposing that the key problem faced in developing a social science of international relations is not epistemological, but ontological.[8] Thus, contrary to Weber, Kant's social science of international relations is in no way incompatible with his broader philosophical project. Indeed, as Kant fully appreciated, it is an essential adjunct to it.

Kant and international systems

Weber objects to interpreting Kant as referring to a distinct and autonomous interstate realm that obeys its own logic. Thus 'Waltz's systemic theory of international

[3] Ibid., p. 46 and p. 50 respectively.
[4] Immanuel Kant, 'Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch', in H. Reiss (ed.), *Kant's Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 104 and p. 108 respectively.
[5] Immanuel Kant, 'Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch', in H. Reiss (ed.), *Kant's Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 109.
[6] Harrison, 'Waltz, Kant and Systemic Approaches', p. 147.
[7] Kant, 'Perpeteual Peace', p. 112.
[8] Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory Of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 38.

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relations, and Kant's account of the international system, are actually so *formally* different that a comparison can reveal little else other than their mutual incompatibility'.[9] However, this underestimates Kant's sophisticated appreciation of the problems posed by the state in international relations, and is an obstacle to understanding how Kant views the system of states as a powerful instrument of progress in world politics.

Kant is remarkable within the revolutionist tradition in as much as he gave very serious consideration to the political problems generated by the existence of the state. He wrote that:

> (t)he idea of international right presupposes the separate existence of many independent adjoining states. And such a state of affairs is essentially a state of war . . . (in which it is) the desire of every state to achieve lasting peace by dominating the whole world. But *nature* wills it otherwise, and uses . . . means to separate nations and prevent them from intermingling. These may certainly occasion mutual hatred and provide pretexts for wars, but as culture grows . . . they lead to mutual understanding and peace . . . (that is) created and guaranteed by an equilibrium of forces and a most vigorous rivalry.

Kant is arguing that the competitive pressures generated by the states system are one of the major historical forces in world politics pushing towards the realisation of the pacific union he envisaged.

Given Waltz's manifest realism, it is somewhat ironic that he is one of the few scholars to have appreciated the significance of Kant's attempt to conceive of the international system as a distinct domain of social activity.[10] However, Waltz equates Kant's conceptualisation of the international system with his own neorealist model. As Huntley identifies, Kant's thought has deeper implications for Waltz's theory. Kant argues that the logic of anarchy does not produce homeostatic reproduction as neorealism implies, but instead may be regarded as self-transforming.[11] Competition and socialisation within an anarchic environment actually push towards the emergence of a pacific union of states. My article sought to explore further the implications of this insight for Kant's conceptualisation of the structure of the international system. In particular, it stressed the role that cultural change and socialisation dynamics have in Kant's account of historical progress. Kant envisaged that the pacific union might generate socialisation effects, at least once enough momentum had been generated within the international system. Under these circumstances, states at the margins of cultural change would be encouraged to internalise shifts in their identity. This would in turn strengthen the pacific union, thereby further reinforcing socialisation pressures within the system. Viewed in this light, Kant's thought may still contain considerable untapped potential, and open up important new arenas for future research within the discipline.

Other independently conducted research has stressed the utility of using Kant's insights to reinterpret the democratic peace as a macro-historical learning process.[12]

[9] Weber, 'Reply To Harrison', p. 146.
[10] See especially Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Kant, Liberalism And War', *American Political Science Review*, 59 (1962), pp. 331–40.
[11] Wade L. Huntley, 'Kant's Third Image: Systemic Sources Of The Liberal Peace', *International Studies Quarterly*, 40 (1996), pp. 45–76.
[12] Lars-Erik Cederman, 'Back to Kant: Reinterpreting The Democratic Peace As A Macro-Historical Learning Process', *American Political Science Review*, 95 (2001), pp. 15–32.

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There are also affinities between the idea that the pacific union may generate socialisation effects and attempts to extend the established democratic peace proposition to the systemic level.[13] Moreover, the notion that anarchy has generative consequences which encourage the realisation of Kant's pacific union may supplement Wendt's 1992 argument that anarchy is *potentially* open to transformation through changes in the culture and identity of the units that populate the international system.[14] Wendt has recently extended this claim by identifying Hobbesian, Lockean and Kantian cultures that may be associated with anarchy, and exploring the possibility that the international system may progress through these cultures over time.[15] However, Wendt makes the explicit qualification that changes in the cultural structure of the international system should not be regarded as being promoted by factors endogenous to the logic of anarchy.[16] Kant's arguments may be used to identify powerful background forces that are capable of overriding the otherwise 'sticky' tendencies associated with cultures of anarchy. This would allow Wendt to introduce a teleological thrust to his arguments. Moreover, it provides a strong precedent in the history of political thought that this may be achieved without compromising either the role of human agency in generating historical progress, or discarding a scientific approach to international relations. Progress towards a Kantian culture may be considered the inevitable culmination of trends set in motion by the initial emergence of a competitive, Hobbesian international system. The interpretation of Kant's views on systemic theory I have set out is therefore not only compatible with Kant's political writings, but may help advance current thinking. Thus it is important for Weber to recognise that *not* viewing Kant as discussing international systems has opportunity costs in terms of potential insights forgone.

Kant and world society

According to Weber, it is erroneous to suggest that the dichotomy between problem solving and critical theory can be transcended through the precedent provided by Kant's political thought.[17] However, this view underestimates the synthetic potential of Kant's political writings, and its utility in overcoming the limitations in contemporary debates about the relationship between the international system and world society.

There is certainly a strong case to be made that Kant did allocate a major role to world society in bringing about historical progress in international relations. Given that it has already been established that Kant also appreciated the significance of the

[13] Bruce Russett and John O'Neal, *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence And International Organisations* (London: W.W. Norton, 2001).
[14] Alexander Wendt, 'Anarchy Is What States Make Of It: The Social Construction Of Powers Politics', *International Organisation*, 46 (Spring 1992), pp. 391–425; see also Harrison, 'Waltz, Kant and Systemic Approches', p. 153.
[15] Wendt, *Social Theory Of International Politics*.
[16] Ibid., p. 311.
[17] On the distinction between problem solving and critical theory see Robert W. Cox, 'Social Forces, States And World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory', in Robert O. Koehane (ed.), *Neorealism And Its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 281.

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problems and constraints generated by the states system, this leaves two possible interpretations of his political writings. The first is that Kant's thought is logically incoherent. Kant discussed the states system, and he also discussed world society. However, he failed to systematically combine the two to produce a general theory of the historical development of world politics. The second is that Kant recognised that the two levels of order in world politics could interact symbiotically, at least over the historical long term. The states system provides a stable framework within which the development of world society would flourish. In turn this would encourage internal political reform within states, and thereby promote cultural change within the international system.

It seems to me that the latter interpretation provides a far more convincing and interesting way of understanding Kant's contribution than the former. Firstly, given the stress Kant laid on the importance of logical rigour in the construction of theories, this is more consistent with his general approach to philosophy. Secondly, and more significantly, it allows the insights of supposedly competing schools of thought within IR theory to be viewed as mutually complementary rather than mutually contradictory. If the international system is conceived of as an open system, then it is perfectly coherent to see it as being involved in a developmental sequence of historical change that operates in tandem with changes in world society. This is a point highlighted by at least one contemporary commentator, albeit operating from a more eclectic theoretical basis.[18] Kant's thought provides a much longer established precedent for this more recent suggestion.

Conclusions

Weber holds that my article proceeds by 'lifting' Kant's thought inappropriately from its historical context into contemporary theoretical debates. The result is that Kant's arguments are seriously distorted, and my attempt to show its utility in relation to these debates leads into a 'dead end'.[19] I would, however, respond that Kant's thought is interesting precisely because it can help contemporary scholars transcend a series of dualisms which are distorting their analysis of the long term dynamics of the international system. My interpretation of Kant can be supported with reference to his political writings. Moreover, a focus on the historical context of the period in which Kant wrote supports rather than undermines this understanding of his insights. I am pleased that Weber adopts a divergent interpretation of Kant's thought on international relations. Weber acknowledges that there is, of course, no definitive statement on the Kantian legacy. However, rather than continuing to debate the viability of my interpretation of Kant, I am now more interested in *applying* Kant's insights to comprehending the dynamics of the post-Cold War order. This is where I believe Kant's thought has the most significant implications for the study of international relations, and consequently the area in which the most interesting and challenging research questions lie.

[18] Barry Buzan, 'From International System To International Society: Structural Realism And Regime Theory Meet The English School', *International Organisation*, 47 (1993), p. 351.
[19] Weber, 'Reply To Harrison', p. 145.

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