On Progress: The Role of Race in Kant’s Philosophy of History

By Elvira Basevich

University of Massachusetts, Lowell

*Forthcoming* in *Proceedings of the 13th International Kant Congress* *‘The Court of Reason’* (Oslo, 6-9 August 2019). Ed. Camilla Serck-Hanssen and Beatrix Himmelmann. Boston: Walter de Gruyter (scheduled for 2021)

1. Introduction

In his influential critique of Kant’s liberalism, Charles W. Mills writes: “Whereas mainstream ideal-theory Kantianism tends to presuppose an already-achieved social ontology of socially recognized equals, [I seek] a social-ontological transformation *to bring that equality about*” (2018a, 18). In order realize the ideal of a just republic (*Rechtsstaat*), Mills confronts the nonideal starting point of the *Rassenstaat*. The latter is distinguished by a “racial contract” that prevents persons of color—and black persons in particular—from participating in the polity as moral equals (2018a, 26). Anglo-European political modernity spreads the values of freedom and equality, while simultaneously denoting which groups can enjoy a full schedule of rights and privileges through the categories of gender and the modern race concept. A *Rassenstaat* thus represents an intransigent “social-ontological reality” marked by white supremacy, a reality that persists *in spite of* the nominal public endorsement of the values of freedom and equality. In other words, a *Rassenstaat* is a failure of a white-controlled polity to progress.

Mills does not directly address the implicit teleological structure of historical development; and so, he does not assess Kant’s philosophy of history as a resource for reimagining the nature of historical progress, although he aspires to use Kant’s practical philosophy to deconstruct the racial contract. In this essay, I argue that what Kant calls “unsocial sociability” assumes a racialized dimension in the aftermath of the establishment of modern states.[[1]](#footnote-1) By racializing unsocial sociability coeval with the rise of political modernity, I center racial conflict as a key obstacle to the advance of justice, that is, progress, and thereby provide a new way for understanding how the racial contract is embedded in the social contract.

1. Kant on Progress

The public recognition of equal moral personhood is the universal normative benchmark by virtue of which Kant measures progress in moral and political life. He sketches an ideal model of political community for the historical development of states into a peaceful international federation. To wit, he defends the idea of public right, in which all persons stand as equal citizens in a domestic and global community and submit to the requirements of justice, protected by coercive public institutions. The idea of public right confronts an innate and inextricable propensity in human nature to self-love that, at best, goads striving and cultural perfectibility and, at worst, exacerbates competition, social domination, and egocentrism. To show that the adoption of heterogenous ends can eventually reconcile into a shared practical commitment to morality and justice, Kant posits the “unsocial sociability” of persons as an unwitting mechanism of progress:

[T]he tendency to come together in society, coupled, […] with a continual resistance […] constantly threatens to break this society up. This propensity is obviously rooted in human nature. […] Nature should thus be thanked for fostering social incompatibility, envious competitive vanity, and insatiable desire for possession or even power. […] Man wishes concord, but nature, knowing better what is good for his species, wishes discord. […] The natural impulses which make [Arcadian, pastoral existence] impossible, the sources of the very unsociableness and continual resistance which cause so many evils, at the same time encourage man towards new exertions of his powers and thus towards further development of his natural capacity. (41)

Kant contends that persons “unconsciously promote the end of history” (41). He explains, “nature makes use of self-seeking inclinations” to produce a state of affairs, where “self-seeking energies […] are *neutralized*” (112). To wit, a legitimate constitutional republic renders an innate propensity to self-love (or moral evil) inconsequential with respect to the public administration of justice and the rule of law. To be clear, Kant rejects that persons can excise an innate propensity to evil. The idea of public right, however, asserts regulative principles to orient judgment and action. Coercive public institutions have a “unifying force” robust enough to “overrule the differences” in individuals’ disparate and unsociable inclinations to establish a rightful state (117). Though his commitment to the historical actualization of moral and political egalitarianism is not prophetic, that is, it does not predict the future, Kant nonetheless affirms that a rightful state “neutralizes” the destructive effects of vicious action and shapes subjective will formation. He thus upholds hope in the prospect of justice, regardless of our historical circumstances or psychological makeup.

Yet Kant must demonstrate that regulative principles, not vicious action, *achieve* a robust practical effect in actually establishing and shaping modern polities. To do this, he ascribes intention to nature, rather than to persons (41). A survey of “the free exercise of the human will *on a large scale* […] will be able to discover a regular progression among freely willed actions” (41). He continues, “In the same way we may hope that what strikes us in the actions of individuals as confused and fortuitous may be recognized, in the history of the entire species, as a steadily advancing but slow development of man’s original capacities” (41). In the natural history of the human species, our “natural” unsociability “aim[s] to produce concord among men, even against their will and indeed by means of their very discord” (108). For example, he rationalizes war, as if its experience inclines persons to recognize the unconditional value of moral and political autonomy and to lobby for peace (Valdez, 2017, 826-827). For the highest task that nature sets for human beings is for us to learn to co-exist “with the freedom of others” (45). We then can avoid “wasting” our natural capacities for reason through endless warfare (43).

Kant’s teleology of history distinguishes two critical moments of transition: 1) the transition from the state of nature into modern society, and 2) the political development of modern states, once they are established. Note that these two transitions require distinct forms of practical engagement for progress to continue. One must thus distinguish the process of *entering* a civil condition from that of *improving* it. Notably, in Kant’s natural history of the human species, nature goads the exit from the state of nature into modern society. But he retires the notion of nature’s intention to describe domestic republican politics, once modern states come into existence. To be sure, a state of affairs akin to a state of nature prevails among states to facilitate a cosmopolitan condition, but with the advent of political modernity, ideally, the public use of reason should be responsible for the cultivation of moral and political autonomy. Kant asserts, “We are,” therefore, “concerned here not with the natural history of mankind[,] but with the history of civilization” (177). The public use of reason is the engine of progress in the “history of civilization” (Ellis 1991, 130).[[2]](#footnote-2) Varden observes that though “human freedom cannot be limited by human nature,” it is inevitably “limited” and “shaped” by our political history (2016, 41). Unfortunately, Kant leaves the teleological structure of the development of modern societies, strangely, unanchored. He offers little guidance for how to make public use of reason, at precisely the moment when we need guidance most (Huseyinzadegan 2019, 87-112). Instead he invokes theoretical modesty about the role of providence in human affairs (109). We are thus left to figure out how public habits of judgment impede or enableprogress henceforth.

1. Racializing Unsocial Sociability

In this section, I provide a novel account of the “social-ontological reality” of what Mills describes as the racial contract of a *Rassenstaat*. In order to discern the public habits of judgment that impede or enableprogress, one must understand how the racial contract takes root in a legitimate state. The racial contract entails a system of social values that undermines the social and political standing, and, ultimately, the innate right to freedom of black (and nonwhite) persons. Because racial whiteness was historically requisite for the public recognition of a person’s value, Mills argues that political power remains embedded in a racially inegalitarian system of recognitive practices (2017, 28-48). While I maintain that ideal theory is indispensable for justice (Matthew 2017; Basevich 2020), Mills’s idea of the racial contract provides a helpful illustration of a critical obstacle in the political development of modern states.

Reflecting on the historical sociology of the Americas, Mills describes the “moral metaphysics” of a social order that emerges with the trans-Atlantic slave trade and colonial genocide and expropriation. These historical episodes shape the recognitive practices to demarcate “a moralized topography of the social order, a relief map of dignity and indignity,” one that positions nonwhites “below the threshold for normatively equal treatment” (2018b, 40). The racial contract thus highlights a system of social values to capture the longstanding and pervasive recognitive practices devaluing nonwhite persons in general and black persons in particular.

Mills argues that Kant’s practical philosophy unwittingly complements the racial contract. Notably, he does *not* argue that people of color are not persons in Kant’s anthropology *or* moral philosophy, a view that has been mistakenly attributed to him. Instead, Mills underscores that nonwhites are not *equally valued* participants in modern life. Members of vulnerable groups are therefore not “fully socially recognized” (2017, 45). In other words, the racial contract showcases that fair and reciprocal interracial relations are *yet* to be achieved through politics. Though he theorizes race in the context of a philosophy of history, Kant does not provide a conceptual map that identifies the absence of fair and reciprocal interracial relations as a pertinent—indeed, central—obstacle to the political development of modern states.

As many scholars have noted, Kant’s teleology of history is central to his deployment of the modern race concept (Mensch 2017a, 2017b; Valdez 2017; Basevich 2020; Bernasconi 2001; Mills 2017). The modern race concept offers a pseudo-scientific “empirical” survey of racial biology that establishes a racial hierarchy on the basis of Kant’s determination of humans’ potential to advance the end of history. Kant posits that racial difference—and racialized conflict—is a measure and a mechanism of progress in the natural history of the human species. His race concept, however, is a grossly specious attempt to explain partial compliance to the requirements of justice in mapping the historical actualization of constitutional republics. He asserts that people of color are “underdeveloped” as practical agents; their judgment tends to rely on nature rather than legislative reason. With his later defense of constitutional republics in a cosmopolitan condition, it is unclear what role—it any—race plays in world history. Pauline Kleingeld thus posits that in his mature political writings race has no pragmatic relevance (2007, 590). It is left behind, so to speak, in the muck of a racist anthropology and merely persists as an inane “natural” feature of human physiology. Kleingeld even suggests that in Kant’s mature teleology of history, “nature aims to overcome race” (591).

However, as a practical force in modern life, racial embodiment continues to accrue profound influence. In fact, Mills asserts that it is with the advent of political modernity that the racial contract emerges. Rather than “overcoming” race, modern societies recreate and exacerbate race and racial inequality. Race is *not* an indelible anthropological feature of human nature, but a *byproduct* of asymmetrical relations of power that first emerges with the establishment of modern states. For, public political culture and basic institutional arrangements *introduce* racializing and racist recognitive practices through which “racial” differences come into view and acquire pragmatic relevance in the first place.

In light of our discussion, we can now better appreciate Mills’s contention that Kant’s practical philosophy complements the racial contract. On the one hand, Kant’s philosophy of race prior to the mid-1790s sketches a repulsive natural history of humans through which supposedly natural “racial” differences goad the transition out of a state of nature and into modern society, albeit people of color fall behind as fully actualized practical agents. On the other hand, Kant’s mature political writings from the mid-1790s onward, at best, dismisses race as a “merely” natural feature of human physiology.[[3]](#footnote-3) In both cases, the Kantian framework ignores the “social-ontological reality” of the racial contract. It fails to broach racially denigrating recognitive practices as a pertinent obstacle to the political development of modern states. In other words, on Kant’s mature model of progress, the final end of history—that is, the advance of justice and morality—do not seem to have a clear path forward to take hold in our nonideal racial realities.

However, Kant’s philosophy of history provides a helpful resource for unveiling the social-ontological reality of the racial contract as a pertinent obstacle to historical progress. Katerina Deligiorgi argues that we can recast political development as “a re-iteration, in more dramatic terms, of the thesis of unsociable sociability” (2006, 458). We can reconceive unsociable sociability as persisting in the aftermath of the establishment of modern states insofar as such a reconceptualization is a helpful guide for the public use of reason. I submit, then, that unsocial sociability persists *against certain racial groups* and becomes central in the “history of civilization.” Of course, Kant never claims that “neutralizing” unsociability renders persons saints or extirpates evil. Bad behavior thrives in the modern era. But he does not redress recognitive relations that, in effect, denigrate entire social groups, such that members of the polity-at-large interact with them, as if they were still in the state of nature. He fails to countenance that unsociability is both systematic and intransigent under public scrutiny in spite of a polity’s nominal commitment to the public values of freedom and equality.

1. Two Implications of Racializing Unsocial Sociability

Two important implications follow in unveiling the racial dimension of systematic and intransigent unsocial sociability in the modern era.

1. First, the politics of race (recognitive practices that condition racial exclusion and domination) *is* central to the unfolding of historical progress. This is a straightforward claim with important ramifications. Kant does not foreground it in his early *or* in his mature political writings, although racially exclusionary habits of judgment are an obstacle for the advance of domestic and cosmopolitan right (Basevich 2020). Instead, I suggest that we gauge the development of political modernity by the extent to which constitutional republics redress racial matters in law and social and economic policies. To be clear, this does not mean that race should be the exclusive focus of public discussion, covering up other salient features of our social identities, but for any item up for discussion citizens should consider the potential impact on vulnerable racial communities and center *their voices* in matters that disproportionately impact their communities. Thus, without forging *interracial* political coalitions progress is impossible. For racially exclusionary habits of judgment continue to undermine the public use of reason and weaken the public sphere as a reliable mechanism of historical progress.

2. The second important implications of the racial dimension of systematic and intransigent unsocial sociability is that it *begins* with the establishment of “rightful,” that is, legitimate, constitutional republics. This means that racialized unsocial sociability occurs—and is socially embedded—*within* the institutional conditions of public right. Kant offers a rather narrow conception of political legitimacy grounded in the public administration of the rule of law, which defines public right. Unfortunately, in his original formulation, the idea of public right not only ignores recognitive practices in civil society (that is, social life) that express racist disrespect and denigration. But such recognitive patterns undermine jurisprudence. In other words, what is or is not morally injurious from the standpoint of public right is often unclear—especially to those administrators in power—in the context of systematic asymmetrical relations of power and a racist system of social values. Consequently, in these circumstances, formal legal equality is often too *weak* to protect the innate right to freedom of persons. Laws are narrowly interpreted and misapplied and come to, in effect, *mask* and *exacerbate* social domination and exclusion. Ergo, a dumb optimism that progress has *already* been realized—and racial justice is a political achievement in the history of modern civilizations—becomes an extremely effective way to entrench further persistent structural injustices (Mensch 2017; Deligiorgi 2006). The upshot is that we need greater theoretical specification than Kant’s practical philosophy has to offer for broaching racially disrespectful and denigrating recognitive practices that stubbornly obstruct the political development of modern states.

I have two suggestions: a) Kant scholars should develop a more demanding model for the public use of reason in rightful but nonideal constitutional republics becausejuridical recognition could be empty and, in effect, conceal or perpetuate social domination and exclusion. Namely, we need to distinguish between the *legitimate* and the *progressive* use of public reason. A legitimate public sphere weighs a cacophony of voices to set a political agenda and express disparate grievances. A progressive public sphere prioritizes the shared experiences of marginalized and excluded social groups, as well as their assessment of the imperfections of public institutions. In other words, a progressive public sphere foregrounds the shared experience of social domination (past and present) in order to understand who is vulnerable to exclusion and to prepare citizens to become better judges and administrators of public right. In particular, the polity-at-large must refrain from arbitrarily rejecting or ignoring the claims of fellow nonwhite citizens. For driving modern political history is a dialectical interplay between the public confrontation of major racial traumas and the progressive, i.e., inclusive, reconstitution of the public sphere.

My second suggestion is b) to rework a Kantian philosophy of history to incorporate the role of grassroots social justice movements in facilitating the progressive reconstitution of the public sphere. Grassroots social justice movements challenge morally injurious habits of judgment and recognitive practices and thereby function to guide the progressive use of public reason. To wit, grassroots social justice movements illuminate particular social interactions that conceal asymmetrical relations of power in a variety of daily encounters in social and public life. They thus highlight concrete structural conditions that show when, where, and how social reciprocity is being denied and persons are not “fully socially recognized.” In doing so, they capture which laws are exclusionary in their practical effects with respect to the large scale impact on social behavior and basic institutional arrangements. Grassroots social movements lift the veil, so to speak, on a social fabric that is punctuated by the daily experience of racist disrespect and denigration that are often dismissed as irrelevant from the standpoint of justice by powerful majorities.

Note that highlighting these asymmetrical relations of power in social and public life, and bringing them to public attention, *is* the struggle to make formal legal equality a meaningful and substantive foundation for the innate right to freedom for all. For, disrespectful and denigrating recognitive practices conceal relations of social domination that target and exclude particular persons *inasmuch as* they are a member of a maligned social group. The mere denial of social reciprocity in recognitive practices is not in itself unjust, though it is hardly virtuous. However, when the denial of social reciprocity is *systematic* and *pervasive*, overtime it comes to form the institutional condition of social domination and exclusion. Its interrogation in the public sphere is therefore vital for progress in any modern polity in which unsocial sociability is racialized, that is, in all Anglo-European states.

1. Conclusion:

In this essay, I provide a new way for understanding how Mills’s idea of the racial contract is embedded in the social contract. Focusing on the role of the modern race concept in Kant’s philosophy of history, I explain why positing that unsocial sociability persists and assumes a racialized dimension with the establishment of modern states is helpful for reformulating the nature of historical progress. Kant scholars still have much work to do to explain the pragmatic significance of race in the political development of modern states. Here I have offered two concrete suggestions for future lines of research.

In closing, I would like to consider the objection that I have only redescribed the racial contract in a more tedious and roundabout fashion. One might ask, what does the notion of racialized unsocial sociability add to theorizing progress and the prospect of racial justice? While I cannot meet the objection here in detail, I would like to note that the notion of unsocial sociability *refines* the idea of the racial contract and contributes something new to our understanding of historical progress. The racial contract maintains that the normative standing ofracialized persons is defined by their complete exclusion from the institutional conditions of public right.The racial contract is thus “fixed” and “supervenes” on the legal order. In contrast, the notion of unsocial sociability can show when racial inegalitarian recognitive practices *falter* at different historical moments, in response to the ebbs and flows of grassroots social justice movements that introduce new values into the public sphere. In other words, though we must be weary of a dumb optimism that racial justice has *already* been achieved in legitimate modern states, the racial contract suggests that the resilience of white supremacy leaves little hope for successful social reforms. But, to his credit at least in this respect, Kant’s philosophy of history is committed to showing how and why the final end of history is still achievable. I thus aim to diagnose the pernicious effects of the racial contract, so as better point forward a viable way for successfully overcoming it through the public use of reason.

Bibliography:

Basevich, Elvira (Forthcoming): “What is a Black Radical Kantianism? Ideal and Nonideal Theory in Charles Mills’s Critique of Kant”. In: *Rethinking Kant*. Vol 6. Edgar Valdez (Ed.).

Basevich, Elvira (2020): “Reckoning with Kant on Race”. In: *The Philosophical Forum*. Early View.

Bernasconi, Robert (2001): “Who Invented the Concept of Race? Kant’s Role in the Enlightenment Construction of Race”. In: Bernasconi, Robert (Ed.): *Race*. Oxford: Blackwell, 11-36.

Deligiorgi, Katerina (2006): “The role of the ‘plan of nature’ in Kant’s account of history from a

philosophical perspective”. In: *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 14.3, 451-468.

Ellis, Elizabeth (2005): *Kant’s Politics: Provisional Theory for an Uncertain World*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Reiss, H.S. (Ed.) (1991): *Kant: Political Writings*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Kleingeld, Pauline (2007): “Kant’s Second Thoughts on Race”. In: *Philosophical Quarterly* 57.229, 573-592.

Matthew, D.C. (2017): “Rawls and Racial Justice”. In: *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 16.3, 235-258.

Mills, Charles W. (2018a): “Black Radical Kantianism”. In: *Res Philosophica* 95.1, 1-33.

Mills, Charles W. (2018b): “W.E.B. Du Bois: black radical liberal”. In: Bromell, Nick (Ed.), *A Political Companion to W. E. B. Du Bois.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 19–56.

Mills, Charles W. (2017): *Black Rights / White Wrongs*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Mensch, Jennifer (2017a): “What’s wrong with inevitable progress? Notes on Kant’s anthropology today”. In: *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 4.1390917, 1-11.

Mensch, Jennifer (2017b): “Caught between character and race: ‘Temperament’ in Kant’s lectures on anthropology”. In: *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 43.1, 125-144.

Valdez, Inés. (2017): “It’s Not about Race: Good Wars, Bad Wars, and the Origins of Kant’s Anti-Colonialism”. In: *American Political Science Review* 111.4, 819-834.

Varden, Helga. (2016): “Self-governance and reform in Kant’s liberal republicanism: Ideal and non-ideal theory in Kant’s Doctrine of Right”. In: *Doispontos* 13.2, 39-70.

1. All references to Kant are from *Reiss, H.S. (Ed.) (1991): Kant: Political Writings. New York: Cambridge University Press*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Kant develops several formulations of the principle of publicity in his mature works, writing in *Perpetual Peace*: “All actions relating to the right of other human beings are wrong if their maxim is incompatible with publicity” (126). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. To be sure, there is strong textual evidence that, at worst, the mature Kant continued to endorse racial hierarchy based on a development thesis about the staggered development among racial groups’ toward “civilization.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)