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Spanish Republicanism: Zurück zu Kant?

El republicanismo español: ¿Zurück zu Kant?

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Abstract

Some Spanish republican theorists argue for recovering Immanuel Kant's philosophy for the left, rescuing him from his unwarranted appropriation by the right and correcting his neglect by progressivism. This article argues that this project is misguided in three ways. First, the implication that conservatism has claimed Kant for its camp is simply wrong, given that intellectuals on the right have long explicitly rejected him. Second, it rests on a faulty premise: that the left and right disagree about abstract concepts. Rather, conservatism represents an ad hoc defense of existing power structures without any firm theoretical commitments. Third, Kant is clearly progressive, as he wrote against conservative contemporaries. To conclude, I claim that the progressives' ill-founded attempt to recover Kant is symptomatic of a broader misunderstanding in how progressives define progressivism and conservatism. I propose rethinking these definitions.

Keywords: kant, Spanish Republicanism, conservatism, political left, progressivism

Resumen

Algunos teóricos políticos republicanos españoles abogan por recuperar la filosofía de Immanuel Kant para la izquierda, rescatándolo de una apropiación indebida de la derecha y corrigiendo el abandono de Kant del progresismo. Este artículo sostiene que este proyecto se equivoca de tres maneras. Primero, su implicación de que el conservadurismo reivindica a Kant es incorrecta, si intelectuales de derecha rechazan a Kant desde hace mucho. Segundo, se basa en una premisa errónea: que izquierda y derecha están en desacuerdo sobre conceptos abstractos. En realidad, el conservadurismo — una defensa ad hoc de las estructuras de poder existentes— no tiene compromisos teóricos básicos. Tercero, Kant es claramente progresista, ya que escribió en oposición a los conservadores de su tiempo. Para concluir, mantengo que este descaminado proyecto es sintomático de errores en cómo los progresistas definen el progresismo y el conservadurismo. Propongo repensar estas definiciones.

Palabras clave: kant, republicanismo español, conservadurismo, izquierda política, progresismo

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Introduction

In recent years, some republican political theorists in Spanish-speaking academe have argued for recovering Immanuel Kant's political philosophy for the left. They advocate rescuing the great Königsberg philosopher from his allegedly undue appropriation by the right and correcting his ill-advised abandonment by progressivism. María Julia Bertomeu, for example, has celebrated the fact that “the republican Kant,” as opposed to a more conservative, liberal one, “is slowly emerging among interpreters” (2019, 178).¹

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

José Luis Villacañas, seeking similarly to wrest Kant from liberal individualist interpreters, denies that “Kantian critique is liberal,” or that it “reinforces the self-referentiality of subjectivity” (100-102). Instead, Villacañas’s Kant presents “a passionate understanding of liberty” that tends toward advocating “a sense of social communion and commonality with one’s fellow,” or of “common realities” that demand “common affection, feeling, participation, and joy.” Kant is thus understood to defend the kind of robust public sector that the left has long championed. In a similar vein, Carlos Fernández Liria and Luis Alegre Zahonero remark that Kant has a decidedly progressive understanding of the concept of the citizen, because he considers among its essential attributes “not only legal freedom and civil equality,” which liberal conservatism would readily grant, “but also civil independence, that is, not having one’s existence or self-preservation depend on anyone else” (*El orden*, 598). And finally, throughout his intellectual career, Antoni Domènech frequently disapproved of those histories of political thought advanced both by conservative liberals in search a reputable forebear —such as Robert Nozick (2009; 1989, 266-67)— and plausibly progressive anti-Enlightenment thinkers, such as like Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (2007), who would falsely portray Kant as a liberal. Not a liberal, but a republican in the classical sense, Kant —who, as Domènech was keen to point out, “never considered property to be a natural right”— should be seen as being closer to modern progressivism’s notion of property as a social institution than to liberalism’s definition of it as a good that exists before any social arrangement and that individuals protect through social compacts (2004, 78).

Although this intellectual project is theoretically defensible, if only because Kant’s *Metaphysics of Morals* makes the explicitly anti-hierarchical (and therefore implicitly anti-conservative) prescription that “only the unanimous and combined will of everyone whereby each decides the same for all and all decide the same for each [. . .] can legislate” (1991, 139), this article will argue that it is misguided in three ways.

First, the premise that conservatism currently holds intellectual ownership of Kant is not entirely convincing, because Kant has been explicitly rejected by significant sectors of the right, including his contemporaries in late-18th-century Europe and modern-day libertarians and nationalists.

Second, the positions of Bertomeu, Fernández Liria, etc. rely on another faulty assumption—that the *rapport de force* of conflict between the political left and right is best explained by their mutual theoretical divergence about abstract concepts, such as freedom or equality. Based on this view, one might argue (wrongly) that progressives or conservatives have enduring commitments to specific, mutually antithetical sets of political ideals and that each group shares basically similar commitments with sympathetic intellectual forbears, such as Kant. Contrary to this position, and drawing on Corey Robin’s *The Reactionary Mind*, I contend that conservatism has no foundational theoretical commitments, but is an *ad hoc*, impassioned defense of existing power structures, whereby whatever ideas conservatives happen to defend are incidental to the more fundamental aim of preserving privilege. Therefore, if Kant is a rhetorical ally of the left, it is not because the left can show that his philosophy is more consistent with left-wing ideas. Ideas can hardly be effective in a debate with the right, which appeals first to feeling and only secondarily to reason.

The third and final way in which progressives’ efforts to recover Kant are misguided is suggested by the first and implied by the second: Kant is indisputably progressive. This conclusion is unavoidable if we appropriately consider that Kant’s political writings are motivated by, littered with, and essentially depend on his opposition to the conservative forces of his day. Therefore, it is absurd for conservatives to argue otherwise, and progressives, by endeavoring to prove Kant’s progressivism, lend intellectual respectability to a baseless position. The conservatives who have opposed Kant (historically and recently) have clearly seen his progressive face. Progressives should do the same, without indulging conservatives’ unfounded attempts to appropriate Kant for themselves.



Kant Was, indeed, a Progressive Republican and Conservatives Know It

I have deliberately recognized the theoretical plausibility of the intellectual project of recovering Kant for the left. However, upon considering the following examples of significant sectors of the right explicitly rejecting Kant, the left's implicit premise that conservatism holds intellectual ownership of him should strike us as unconvincing and the enterprise of recuperating him unnecessary.

Kant's attachment to the modern concept of a universal right to equal liberty in his 1793 essay "On the Common Saying: That May Be True in Theory, but It Is of No Use in Practice" was anathema for conservative contemporaries such as Friedrich von Gentz, August Wilhelm Rehberg, and Justus Möser. For these defenders of the Old Regime, liberty was compatible with service according to social rank. Kant's relatively progressive position was that "every member of the society" should enjoy freedom not as a function of his place in society, but, generally and universally, "as a human being" (1991, 74). Contrary to Kant, Gentz argued that essentially contingent, hereditary privileges are sometimes justified, particularly when they are in keeping with local tradition, such as those of monarchs in monarchies, senators in aristocracies like Venice, or lords in England (98). Möser, too, defended inherited privilege, not only out of deference for the status quo, but as being at least theoretically beneficial to people and therefore rationally preferable (1798). Rehberg, for his part, rejected Kant's *a priori* proposition of humans' natural freedom and equality, stating that political principles should be derived not abstractly but from the conventions of particular communities, even if, counter to one of Kant's categorical imperatives, this meant not treating humans merely as ends (119). Indeed, on Rehberg's view, "the right to freedom does not belong to the member of the commonwealth as such," but depends on the kind of historical and socio-political context Kant thought us able to look beyond (123).

Conservative opposition to Kant has continued more recently. Although some libertarians claim that Kant's stress on autonomy implies opposition to a state's redistribution of fiscal revenue, others recognize and typically object to his broader position against society's abiding by high levels of economic inequality. Kant will

thus be unappealing to anyone who, like a typical libertarian, argues that unequal merit justifies unequal social arrangements. So, we can partly explain why libertarians who have drawn on Kant, such as Friedrich Hayek and Robert Nozick, have been careful not to base their positions on any notion of meritocracy. After all, if all humans are supposed to be equal in dignity, moral superiority or unequal abilities cannot be bases for social inequalities. However, if Hayek and Nozick managed to cherry-pick what they liked about Kant while conveniently discarding what they did not, the anti-statist Ayn Rand could not even tolerate the assumption of every human's basic moral worth. For this most anti-Kantian figure, most of humanity are "inferior men" who, as such, are in debt to a small minority of "superior men," who alone should exercise power.

Complementing libertarians' uneasiness with Kant's insistence on fundamental equality, conservative nationalists have attacked his individualism and internationalism. Kant believed people's contingent bonds—including most notably the sorts of immediate relationships that are emphasized by such thinkers as Carl Schmitt or Yoram Hazony—constitute, at best, an incomplete journey toward a fully enlightened moral outlook. Indeed, such a mature perspective should entail one's ability to critique any received tradition that is inconsistent with universal moral principles. Kant's "What Is Enlightenment?" urges individuals not to see their identities and ethical duties as deriving from local traditions, but as those of generally rational agents capable of moral autonomy. But, for Hazony, the Kantian and typically modern notion of the naturally free and equal individual that is "able to discover universal truths that hold across all human societies" is not just wrong conceptually (2019); it is also a moral failure that has "the nations of the West [. . .] hurtling toward an abyss." Schmitt, for his part, was less sweeping but philosophically deeper in his critique, saying that Kant's extra-communitarian moral neutrality would amount to a negation of otherwise healthy inter-national political relationships. Specifically, it would "deny the concept of a *justus hostis*" (171), or just enemy, by rendering immoral all conflict between peoples that could not be sanctioned by a supposedly neutral ethical arbiter. For conservatives such as Hazony and Schmitt, it is indisputable that humans share stronger moral connections with

others who are like them in some meaningful sense. Although Kant conceded that it is historically true that the kinds of social attachments preferred by Hazony and Schmitt have been the stronger, the two sides remain mutually opposed. If Hazony and Schmitt's position is that humans' optimal moral maturity will be realized within relatively immediate national groupings, Kant believed that moral growth should enable humans' recognition that the moral relevance of being a member of a particular community should matter little when contrasted with a shared humanity.

Progressives Should Not Bring Knives to a Gun Fight; Conservatism Is about Power, Not Ideas

Admittedly, it does not follow from the fact that some conservatives have been anti-Kant that Kant is anathema to conservatism in general. It does suggest, however, that Kant is hardly an unquestionably conservative figure who, as such, might need to be rescued from the right and for progressivism. In any case, a more important reason why the left should not try to dispute conservatives' claims to Kant is that doing so presupposes, wrongly, that conservatives engage with their political opponents in debate that is fundamentally about ideas, such as (Kant's understanding of) autonomy, morality, or justice. Although ideas obviously appear in conservatives' articulations of their positions, they are what Robin has called "historically specific" "byproducts" that are not fundamental in the sense that conservatives' basic motivation is not intellectual, but passion arising from fear of losing some form of social privilege (15-16). In fact, although they surely would not acknowledge such a glaring defense of privilege, conservatives themselves typically point out that conservatism evolves not as a function of any philosophical system but is rather what Elie Kedourie called an *a posteriori* "codification" of whatever happens to be the "outcome of [conservatives'] activity" (38). Similarly, Richard Bourke has called conservatism a "belated construction" (449), which is the opposite of a principled defense of philosophical tenets. With a more critical pen, James Alexander has listed certain "contradictions of conservatism" that have predictably resulted from the sort of after-the-fact definitions discussed by Bourke and

that seem to reveal a willingness to defend one thing and its opposite, presumably in the service of some underlying objective, such as holding power. Whatever the goal, Alexander observes that actually-existing conservatism is so intellectually inconsistent that it should strike us as being more focused on some end than on any particular means; indeed, as he writes, conservatism is "against change; and yet it accepts change. It is against ideology; and yet it is an ideology. It is against reaction; and yet it involves reaction. It advocates no ideals; and yet it advocates ideals. It is secular; but it is religious. It is in favour of tradition; but there is nothing in it which prevents it from eventually abandoning any tradition" (596).

In a review of Reidar Maliks's recent book, *Kant's Politics in Context*, Mike Wayne also alluded to conservatism's historical inconsistencies, revealingly observing "how foreign and strange Kant's conservative critics look from our contemporary conservatives" (Wayne). Indeed, it is hard to square Möser's explicitly anti-Enlightenment argument that "one cannot move directly from the voice of nature or abstract human rights [. . .] to the state of civil association" with the more recent conservative Robert Nozick's (consciously Kantian) defense of the theoretical "principle that individuals are ends and not merely means" who, as such, "may not be sacrificed or used for the achievement of other ends without their consent" (in Muller 71; Nozick 30-34). Political power was Möser's bulwark against the extension of abstractly conceived rights, but, for Nozick, it was a primary threat to their realization. And another 20th-century conservative, Murray Rothbard, similarly held that "the State is an inherently illegitimate institution" (187). Yet Nozick and Rothbard are apparently at odds with both Möser and the conservative exemplar William Blackstone's early modern justification of state power: "any government is better than none at all" (157).

We are thus faced with recent and more remote conservatives, all of whom are highly representative of the conservatism of their times, but who have opposing views about questions as crucial as what individuals can expect from society and the scope of state power. In what sense, then, are they all conservative? If positive definitions (such as, 'conservatives believe that liberty means X') fail, then we should try defining conservatism



negatively. It may be the case that Möser and Nozick, for example, are similar not because of what they stand for, but what they are against.

Conservatism as Opposition to Progressivism

When Michael Oakeshott defined conservatism as “a disposition appropriate to a man who is acutely aware of having something to lose” (169), he implied that a typical conservative understands his political identity at least in part as being opposed to whatever or whoever might somehow cause him to lose something. He also suggested, perhaps unwittingly, that it may not be easy to identify conservatism’s basic (context-transcending) principles. Admittedly, embracing such a definition was to some extent Oakeshott’s precise aim in *Rationalism in Politics*, which sought to cast doubt on the wisdom of applying abstract reason to politics. However, one can reasonably doubt that he intended to imply that conservatism is so relativistic that it lacks any criterion for ranking the moral worthiness of those who might question the status quo or that a conservative could be anyone who, however crudely, casts as his adversary anyone who challenges whichever of society’s features he wants to maintain.

Like Oakeshott, conservatives Roger Scruton and Friedrich Hayek also may have revealed more than they wanted when they wrote, respectively, that “in times of crisis [...] conservatism does its best” (11) and that conservatives’ reasoned defense of the free market “became stationary when it was most influential” and “progressed when on the defensive” (54). If Scruton and Hayek were right, then conservatism seems to depend not on its commitment to any set of concepts, but on confrontation with an adversary. Robin presumably understood things this way when he suggested that conservatives care less about the “truth of [their] ideas” (which would suffice independent of any contrast) than about the “strength of their ideas,” which is useless without something to vanquish (247). If Robin’s assessment is accurate, then it is little wonder that the original *realpolitiker*, the late-19th-century conservative German chancellor Otto von Bismark, preferred the strength of what Robin might have called the “resonance” or “cultural purchase” of his proto-welfare-state reforms to fidelity to a body of ideas. Bismark’s material concessions to poor and working classes were a

tacit recognition that conservatism had lost an intellectual battle about what these segments of society could demand of the aristocracy or the State. But, more importantly for our purposes, it was a powerful rearrangement of the political chessboard, whereby late-19th-century German conservatism—newly invigorated by the incorporation of workers with a sudden stake in society’s preservation—would continue to oppose a weakened progressivism. In the case of conservatism of the Bismarkian kind and in general, defeat in the realm of ideas does not diminish its strength, which is drawn not from intellectual steadfastness but from its ability to define an opponent.

But conservatism’s dependency on what it is not can be appreciated without having to glean it implicitly from the theoretical likes of Burke or Oakeshott or cynical Bismarkian policy. Britain’s Conservative Prime Minister Lord Salisbury was unambiguous in defining conservatism as “hostility to Radicalism, incessant, implacable hostility” (in Ramsden, 5), and American conservative scholar George Nash made clear his side’s negative definition by calling it “resistance to certain forces perceived to be [. . .] subversive of what conservatives at the time deemed worth cherishing” (xiv). Remarkably, by this definition, conservatives could, in principle, stand for anything, as long as they are opposing some political force seeking to undermine something they want to preserve. Thus, as Robert Michels reasoned in 1930 (and as Michels’s Trotskyite contemporaries might have agreed), there may be little contradiction in saying that “the Bolsheviks of today are as conservative as the czarists of yesterday” (1945, 230).

Michels’s words are interesting not because of anything they reveal about Bolshevism, but because they suggest that conservatism may be simply the position of any social group (including formerly revolutionary groups) that—exhibiting what Michels called a limitless capacity for “modification” (1968, 44)—can effectively draw inclusive and exclusive social boundaries. So, Bismark’s workers were strategically brought into the fold of mainstream German society; Lenin and Stalin violently excluded Nicholas II and Trotsky; or, for a more recent example, the West’s political right has transitioned smoothly since the mid-20th century from anti-communism to anti-terrorism, to anti-immigration. Exercising what Nietzsche called the “seigneurial privilege of giving names” (1994, 12),

each of these dominant groups has had an outsized ability to affirm its power by effectively establishing what constitutes socio-political heterodoxy.

Conservatism's Historical Waffling

Yet more compelling examples of conservatism's lack of positive principles is that, historically, it has stood for both one and the other of mutually exclusive, diametrically opposed positions, often defending things that previous generations of the political right had stridently opposed. Indeed, before Reagan and Thatcher turned to free trade, early modern conservatives were for mercantilism and the conservative Federalists of the United States' founding generation advocated robust protectionism. And the free-trade conservatism of the Davos variety was against nationalism before various populist nationalist movements began upbraiding Davos as intolerably globalist, liberal, and elitist.

For a more focused example of such contradictions, we might note that the ever-conservative American South—whose economy was largely agricultural and heavily reliant on slave labor from the 17th to the 19th centuries—was self-interestedly opposed industrial capitalism as long as this economic model represented the interests of the northern states, where racial injustice was certainly stark but racial distinction less central to white citizens' socio-political identity. Around the 1960s, when the North effectively undermined capitalist orthodoxy by supporting the Civil Rights Act of 1964—which could be at least partially defined as a state-driven legal prescription for achieving greater racial equality—the South, initially moved by presidential candidate Richard Nixon's "Southern Strategy" in 1968, arguably reacted by warming to free markets. Whatever the cause, the region would become the most reliable bastion of votes for the economic liberalism that, starting in the 1970s, tended increasingly to characterize the United States' Republican Party. However, more recently, the presidency of Donald Trump (2017-2021)—which, like contemporary nationalist conservative movements from Brazil to the United Kingdom and India, positioned itself in opposition to the prevailing liberal international order's promotion of open markets—has seen diverse and influential right-wing sectors embrace top-down, state-centric solutions to social problems. Breaking

with decades of economically liberal conservatism, a populist media personality such as Fox News' Tucker Carlson recently denounced the low wages earned by workers at Amazon, an internet retailer, as a "scam," while a very different sort of think-tank intellectual, Oren Cass, celebrated, in a manner oddly reminiscent of Charles Fourier and any number of progressive thinkers in the modern era, that a "new," "working-class conservatism" can "free the Right from free-market orthodoxy" and instead "recognize the pernicious effects that high levels of economic inequality can have on the social fabric" (@TuckerCarlson; Cass). Completing this conservative about-face, Cass writes that "organized labor," and indeed, "a vibrant labor movement" that "[places] workers on an even footing with firms" should no longer be conservatives' political opponent, but should be made "a conservative priority."

Beyond conservatives' changing positions on economic issues, we can point to the defense of the social order of someone like Burke (who assured readers that hierarchies were both natural and salutary), together with the historical fact that individuals on the right have seemed to respect not authority *per se* but only its forms they happen to like. Ironically, conservatives frequently pit themselves against so-called elites in large cities, universities, and much of the news media, effectively ignoring the fact that, by Burke's own logic, such groups might be considered aristoi as well as the sort of upper-class guarantors of tradition that Burkeans typically believe essential to proper social order. Indeed, despite theoretical support for established norms, conservatives' lack of actual deference to authority is such that one often hears them justify both (illegal) non-compliance with laws that don't suit them and even outright insurrection if the legal code does not conform to their liking. The military coups that set off civil wars in the United States in 1861 and Spain in 1936 are only some of the most violent examples of this pattern.

Finally, turning from economics and authority to ethics and morality, conservatism over time has evinced remarkably contradictory positions about individual rights and personal privacy. Premodern conservatives' suspicion of potential vice in the private sphere was a moralistic tool aimed at compelling ethical obedience. Modern bourgeois revolutions rebelled against many of the social norms of this old regime, ushering



in a more individualistic modern era. So, at the dawn of modernity, the notion that individuals should have a right to privacy was a progressive idea that challenged long-standing ethical views. And yet today's conservatives manage to benefit from this paradigm shift toward a more robust understanding of individual liberty as much as progressives do; and they may in fact benefit more. Indeed, despite the fact that pre-modern moral traditionalists surely had usury and material acquisitiveness in mind when condemning the private realm's tendency toward vice, modern conservatives have expected society to leave rich businesspeople alone, so they can run their affairs as they wish. Not only is the corporate class not criticized by conservatives for its acquisitiveness, but the business leader is widely viewed as a model citizen. Remarkably, medieval traditionalists scorned privacy as a space of temptation toward evil, and modern economic conservatives (who have replaced Christian moral authorities atop the social ladder) usually ally themselves politically with today's traditionalists, who still scorn the private sphere's evils, but seem to do so mostly when these are allegedly practiced by persons largely outside of society's privileged sectors (e.g., LGBTQ.) The private vices of the privileged (e.g., usury and the high levels of wealth accumulation that exists alongside and arguably contributes to widespread destitution) are not only not the object of rebuke; in a capitalist economic system, they are typically practiced by some of society's most reputable members.

So, are conservatives for or against privacy? Historically and currently, the answer is both. Today, the privacy advocated by the financial industry and large corporations does not bother their fellow conservatives of a Christian traditionalist sort, nor do the latter group's rigid moral prescriptions—which, if they are to have any social relevance, would tend to justify violations of privacy—bother the capitalist conservative. Such relatively different economic and social conservatives are perhaps only implicitly aware of Italian aristocrat Tancredi Falconeri's famous acknowledgement in Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's *Il Gattopardo*: that if the privileged classes “want things to stay as they are, everything will have to change” (29). Despite vast moral disagreement, their alliance remains steadfast, presumably because it is impelled by what Robin has called “a more elemental force,”

“the opposition to the liberation of men and women from the fetter of their superiors” (15-16).

Kant's Obvious Progressivism, and How the Left Misses It

The fact that left-wing political theorists take the conservatives' claim to Kant seriously, rather than seeing it as rhetorical artifice that is wielded in the service of the fundamental goal of preserving social power, is symptomatic of their failure to see the contradictions discussed above. Indeed, these contradictions should lead us to doubt conservatives' intellectual earnestness. But such indulgence by the left of the right is not the only problem. By making the case for Kant's progressivism, progressive thinkers implicitly concede that the question of whether Kant was progressive or conservative can rightly be a matter of philosophical disagreement. To be sure, this question could be controversial, given certain premises. But I intend precisely to dispute the presuppositions that needlessly feed the controversy.

If we define conservatism, as I propose we do, as that political stance that seeks to maintain some form of privilege, then we suggest that conservatism's opposite, progressivism, will be constituted by those forces that challenge the privilege that conservatives protect. According to these definitions, Kant's writings are undeniably progressive, or anti-conservative. When advocating for “the equality of men” and everyone's entitlement “to reach any degree of rank which a citizen can earn through his talent [and] industry,” Kant makes clear his anti-conservative intent by citing as obstacles to his egalitarian ideal only the most important conservative interests of 18th-century Europe—namely, “hereditary prerogatives” and “privileges of rank” (1991, 75). Further, Kant assumes that this “principle of equality” will “certainly conflict” with an allegedly unjust status quo that presumably had conservative proponents—namely, a pre-modern social structure in which a man can own “more land than he can cultivate with his own hands” and a traditional legal system that grants such individuals “a privileged status so that their descendants would always remain feudal landowners” (78). Significantly, Kant always seems to assume that the opponent of his argument is some beneficiary of the kind of noble or aristocratic status typical of medieval and early modern Europe. So, to question

his progressivism is analogous to doubting that of a 21st-century critic of today's primary wielders of power and privilege, such as major stakeholders in global finance.

But Kant's progressivism is likely to be missed if we start with a different definition of progressivism, one that many on the left espouse today, if sometimes only implicitly. When modern progressives disqualify a historical figure from their ranks just because that figure had an opinion or did something that today's left would deem conservative or somehow not progressive in modern circumstances, they imply that progressivism is, at best, an ideal that probably no one will ever achieve. Indeed, based on this definition, one is a progressive if and only if one holds both every progressive view of one's own time and all those views that progressives will hold after one's death, whatever those happen to be. It is extremely unlikely that anyone will ever satisfy these criteria, not least because one naturally cannot influence the specific content of all future progressive positions. Nevertheless, based on these expectations, Kant's progressivism is often missed, even denied, by some contemporary progressives, who point to his rejection of the right of rebellion against the state and his neglect of (and, admittedly, even outright opposition to) such progressive ideas of his time as those seeking to reduce gender and racial inequality. About the right of rebellion, for example, Radu Neculau regrets that "Kant's private approval of the [French] revolution is not matched by a corresponding conceptual justification in his legal philosophy of the revolutionary principle as an instrument of social and political change" (108), while David Cummiskey seems to believe that his defining Kant as a progressive depends on his ability to understand "[w]hy [...] Kant, despite applauding the sentiments of sympathy for progressive revolutions, condemn[ed] the actions of the revolutionaries?" (220). On gender, Inder S. Marwah argues that "women's subordinate status" in Kant is so "internally connected to [his] view of moral personhood"—a centerpiece of his essentially progressive position against his conservative contemporaries—that it logically undermines it (551). And finally, Lucy Allais's article on "Kant's Racism" seems to suggest that, because his views on race "cannot be made consistent" with what she

acknowledges to be his "inspiring enlightenment ideas of human autonomy, equality and dignity," it is the former part of his legacy that has a better claim on scholars' attention (1). Although one might justly criticize any number of Kant's claims, to argue on these grounds that Kant was not progressive is wrong in two ways, which I will outline below.

The argument that Kant's rejection of the right of rebellion makes him a conservative relies on two related, faulty premises: (1) that rebellion is not something that is typically done by conservatives and that progressives might therefore oppose on progressive grounds in order to forestall conservative rebellion and (2) that to rebel against the government is an intrinsically progressive act and never a conservative one. These assumptions are not only at odds with the historical record. They also contradict some important, recent progressive historiography.

That conservatives are capable of undermining established government is well-attested in both ancient and modern sources. In ancient Athens, Thucydides called attention to the treachery as well as the violence of the coup of 411 that gave way to the oligarchic government of the Four Hundred (8.63).² Xenophon's later discussion of the oligarchic 'Thirty Tyrants' who overthrew Athens's democracy in 404 highlighted the vengeful eagerness of Critias not only to seize political control but violently "to put [...] to death" many democratic leaders (2.3.15). And Aristotle, for his part, makes clear in his account of the same event that Critias, Lysander, etc. did not assume any political power that was rightfully or naturally theirs, but that Athens "[fell]" to these rebellious usurpers (34.2). In more recent times, it was surely not progressive but reactionary forces that defied state power when Benito Mussolini's Fascist Party marched on Rome in 1922 or when, in 2021, supporters of U.S. president Donald Trump followed the historical example of Confederate insurrectionists by storming into their country's Congress to derail the proceedings that would effectively make official the loss of their preferred candidate in the recent federal elections and the presidency of his legitimate successor, Joseph Biden. As I will show below, when Kant rejected the right of rebellion, he had in mind primarily this sort of conservative

2. Thucydides's καταέλυτο has been variously translated as "put down" (Crawley 579) and "subverted" (Jowett 498), and Greek-English bilingual dictionaries, such as Tuft University's Perseus Digital Library (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/>), show that 'destroy' may also be appropriate. When the variety of these options does not suggest the violence of the original Greek, it suggests a kind of conservative subversiveness that those on the left who wrongly see their side as the only practitioner of transgressive behavior fail to see.



rebelliousness and, more specifically, that of his conservative contemporaries.

When Kant's progressive critics label him a conservative because of his opposition to revolution, their position is doubly awkward: first, because it seems to ignore the above examples and the content of Kant's texts; and second, because recent historical analysis that is favorable to progressivism is premised on at least the possibility that a political revolt can be carried out by conservatives and that, therefore, opposing such action is not in principle anathema to progressivism. I will refer to this latter point first.

Progressive historians have recently challenged (as Whiggishly conservative) a traditional, and highly influential account of the American Revolution; namely, that it was a freedom-seeking fight in the name of a very broadly defined "people," championed most famously by Jefferson. These historians have refuted the thesis that the revolution's primary philosophical articulation, Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, was meant to argue for the equality of anything close to a literal understanding of "all men" as well as the more modest assertion that Jefferson's document, if not progressive by today's standards, can still serve progressive ends as an implicit promise of constant progress toward equality. According to this revised account, "the incipient scientific racism of [Jefferson's] *Notes of the State of Virginia* (1785) emerges as at least as important as the nonracial, revolutionary lines he authored in 1776" (Singh 9), and the United States' "republican founding and racial slavery" constitute "intertwined legacies" (Lee 500). In both cases, America's Founders are not beacons of political libera(liza)tion; they are elites whose rebellion not only maintained their position atop a social pyramid, but effectively strengthened it through codification in their own national legal framework.

One's position in this historiographical debate is no matter here. My aim is merely to point to a logical inconsistency in current progressive challenges to canonical interpretations of several aspects of early modern intellectual and political history—namely, some suggest that America's foundational revolt had conservative ends, yet ignore the evidence that Kant's wariness of

revolution was based precisely in his appreciation of conservatives' revolutionary potential.

One's interpretation of Kant's view of popular rebellion may depend on what one thinks Kant meant when referring to "the people."³ Suffering from excessive romanticism, modern-day progressives are liable to be affronted by Kant's opposition of a people's revolt. On this view, Kant carried on a centuries-long tradition of thwarting the political action of communities' lowest rungs, which is supposed to include the likes of Spartacus and his followers in Rome and medieval Europe's *jacqueries* and may play out further if the revolutionary potential of what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have called the global "multitude" (xi). However, regardless of whether we classify such dissidents as understanding themselves as cohesive groups of political actors or, I think more appropriately, as spontaneous expressions of discontent that, as such, do not satisfy the definition of a people, Kant surely did not mean to limit the political agency of such lowly social strata when he wrote that the maintenance of justice requires strict control over the privileges of any "corporation, class or order within the state which may [. . .] hand down land indefinitely" and specifically over the "groundless [...] prerogative" of any "hereditary nobility" (148; 152). Nor was he restricting society's weakest members when he reasoned that justice entails not constraints on the marginalized but that "those in power not [. . .] deny or detract from the rights of anyone" (123). And when we see Kant ask whether "rebellion [is] a rightful means for a people to use in order to overthrow the oppressive power of a so-called tyrant" (126), we should be mindful of the intended connotation of the word "tyrant," which suggests that Kant's anti-rebellion position was aimed at society's most powerful sectors. After all, since at least Republican Rome's Senatorial coup against Julius Caesar in 44 BCE and continuing through English noblemen's 13th-century confrontation with King John and the American Declaration of Independence's pointedly addressing England's King George III, conservative political restiveness has typically been the result of frustration with individual leaders whose governance style threatens to eclipse their political clout. Progressives are generally more focused on addressing structural injustices, making it hard

3. References to "the people" appear in Kant 1991, 81; 83; 101; 139; 153; and 187.

to imagine their fixation on sidelining a single figure. Supposing Kant understood this difference, the word “tyrant” strongly suggests that he was directing his argument not at Hardt and Negri’s multitude or Fanon’s wretched of the Earth, but at those who, claiming traditional privileges, might chafe under a leader’s efforts to govern based on rational principles.

Indeed, one easily forgets the allusive political significance of the title of one of Kant’s major political texts, “On the Common Saying: ‘This May Be True in Theory, but It Does Not Apply in Practice’”—which is a thinly veiled (and knowingly progressive) reference to his contemporary conservatives’ typical praise of practical wisdom and opposition to the more abstract philosophical method of more progressive *Aufklärer*. With influential conservative figures such as Hume, Burke, Möser, and Rehberg consistently arguing that European societies should defer to historical tradition instead of implementing progressives’ untested political theories, the rhetorical battle lines of 18th-century European political philosophy were clearly drawn, and Kant’s position on the progressive side cannot seriously be doubted; not even by the sort of post-colonial figures that typically dismiss Kant as uninteresting, for being incorrigibly dead, white, European, and male. Indeed, if Darder et al. were to consistently apply their prescription that inquiries into (formerly) colonized peoples “should be evaluated in terms of indigenous, not Western, ideological and political criteria” to our present study of early modern European thought, then Kant’s work, too, should be studied according not to 21st-century criteria, but to those of Central and Western Europe in the wake of the French Revolution. And, in this latter context, Hume argued that moral and political truth is “more properly felt” in particular circumstances “than judged” abstractly by philosophers (470); Burke asserted that individuals’ social rights should not be posited as being pre-politically “original,” but should be “settled by convention” (218); and Rehberg—following Möser’s objection to those rationalist progressives “who wish the state to be governed according to the prescriptions of some academic theory” (in Muller, 155)—opened his reply to Kant’s “On the Common Saying” by proposing that theoretical truth could not rely only on (Kantian) pure rationality, but must account for practically defined “certain perspectives” and “certain

relations” (in Gregory, 1). Kant stood in conscious, direct opposition to these views. In its opening lines, his pointedly titled *Metaphysics of Morals* explicitly rejected the sort of “purely empirical theory of right” advocated by his conservative interlocutors, before positing that “the birthright of freedom” should not be empirically gleaned but theoretically intuited as an “innate right” (1991, 132; 1900, 237). Meanwhile, “On the Common Saying” argued that the “rightfulness of every public law” has nothing to do with its respect for precedent, but with whether that law adheres to theoretical principles so that, in principle, it “could have been produced by the united will” of all the public’s members (1991, 79). Thus, unlike his conservative peers, for Kant, “an idea of reason” was not politically irrelevant or subordinate to the demands of received custom; ideas should potentially have “undoubted practical reality.”

Conclusion

In attempting to demonstrate Kant’s progressivism, I have acknowledged that recent efforts by Spanish-language political philosophy to recover him from allegedly unwarranted right-wing appropriations and in the interest of left-wing theory are partly justified. But I have argued that this project is ultimately misguided in three ways. First, conservatives have always opposed Kant’s ideas, casting doubt on any notion that Kant could reasonably be defined as conservative or not progressive. Second, even if we consider examples of conservatives’ embracing Kant, there is good reason to be skeptical of the sincerity of their positions, based on conservatives’ long history of defining themselves negatively, in a fundamentally adversarial and primarily rhetorical relationship with rival progressive positions. And third, any project of recovering Kant for the left wrongly presupposes that Kant’s progressivism could be doubted by fair-minded observers.

To lend credence to the idea that Kant was not progressive is not only unhelpful for Kantian scholarship; it also implies a definition of progressivism that is both hardly possible to satisfy and enervating for progressive politics: that to be a progressive is to satisfy both the criteria for progressivism of one’s own time and those of posterity. Based on this definition, 21st-century progressives might lament Kant’s opposition to such features of more recent left-wing thought as



a people's right to rebel against its government or that a practical concern such as the general welfare should be central in evaluating the justice of a political system. However, Kant's arguments against these notions were directed at his conservative contemporaries—specifically, against both restive aristocrats impatient with an emerging republicanism and traditionalist conservative pragmatists who shunned theoretical definitions of the good. Therefore, to maintain that these arguments should have us question Kant's progressivism carries the awkward implication that any number of the 21st-century left's positions against 21st-century conservatives—e.g. the nationalization (rather than the privatization) of certain industries or publicly subsidized (versus strictly private) employment—could rightly be deemed conservative by later generations. Indeed, we need not even imagine a progressive case made by inhabitants of relatively poor countries against richer nations' wielding their economic might so that their own populations receive greater advantages than less fortunate ones. But such a case should not convince anyone that state-led manufacturing or public works projects (which are among the most important challenges to current right-wing free-market positions) are conservative undertakings. To deny an argument's progressive credentials because it entails some form of privilege for someone or some group would absurdly imply that an idea can be deemed progressive only if it redounds to the benefit of the single individual who is currently least-advantaged. Against this possibility, I propose that progressivism be defined as that set of positions that counters contemporary conservative interests—a definition that is only superficially similar to the one I have proposed for conservatism, the crucial difference being that conservatism (or the political philosophy that represents the interests of a society's privileged sectors) essentially is more effective in setting the terms of public debate than progressivism. If we define progressivism as I suggest, then Kant's place on the left side of the political divide is indisputable. But beyond the exegesis of Kant's texts, this way of understanding progressivism as a political concept should help left-wing thinkers avoid the sort of debilitating one-upmanship whereby disputing others' progressive credentials seems more important than questioning the politically harmful effects of undeserved social privilege. I am

convinced that the colleagues whose ideas I have questioned in this article would agree that quelling this kind of infighting among progressives would be beneficial to their broader goal of advancing progressive ideas. I have merely sought to call attention to the possibility that their arguments in favor of a progressive interpretation of Kant unwittingly adopt some of the assumptions that enable such fruitless variance.

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