

Kleingeld, Bernasconi and Kant's colonialism:
challenging collective denial

By

Dapo Ladimeji

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Kleingeld has been fighting a rearguard action in defence of Kant for many years. Her article 'Kant's Second Thoughts on Colonialism'¹ deserves attention.

Kleingeld's primary thesis has been that Kant changed his mind in his last years. This has been strenuously challenged particularly by Robert Bernasconi².

The primary thesis of this note is as follows: Kleingeld in order to justify the claim that Kant changed his mind towards the end of his life has sought to exaggerate and distort his earlier opinions in order to magnify the apparent difference with his later opinions.

A fundamental weakness of her approach is that it fails to place Kant's racist comments into the context of his philosophy and so allows a 'comparisons of statements' test. But there are strong reasons why Kant should amend his expression towards the end of his life. Kant was always particularly concerned with how his views would be received. In 1794 the French Revolution made a momentous change in abolishing slavery throughout France and its empire. Whereas Kant's negative comments earlier were simply in support of the status quo, to make such comments while French revolutionary troops were storming Europe and had invaded the Rhineland would be interpreted quite differently and could put him in harms way. This is merely a matter of contemporary presentation and a proper understanding of Kant's views will show he had no need to change his inner mind to say what he said earlier and later.

A secondary thesis of this note is that Kant scholars can be seen to be going through the five stages of grief/mourning³ over the loss of innocence on Kant. For convenience one may recap the five stages:

1. Denial
2. Bargaining
3. Depression
4. Anger
5. Acceptance.

¹ Pauline Kleingeld, "Kant's Second Thoughts on Colonialism," in *Kant and Colonialism* (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 2014).

² Robert Bernasconi, "Kant's Third Thoughts on Race," in *Reading Kant's Geography* (New York USA: SUNY, 2011).

³ Elizabeth Kubler Ross and David Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss* (London [England]: Simon & Schuster, 2005).

On this model Kleingeld can be seen as moving from Denial to Bargaining. Whereas the first defenders merely denied that Kant's racist comments had anything to do with his philosophy, Kleingeld takes a radical departure for a Kant defender in that she accepts that he was entirely racist only to insist he had a 'death bed conversion'. In fact it will be argued that in her desperation to defend Kant she actually maligns Kant's earlier views.

Kleingeld's tactic is as follows:

1. Kant in 'Idea for a universal History..' ⁴ and other earlier works clearly supports a future where Europe colonises the rest of the world.
2. However in "Toward Perpetual Peace.." ⁵ Kant severely criticises European colonialism and slavery
3. QED: Kant must have changed his mind.

However just as with the first stage 'deniers' her approach involves abandoning all scholarly standards. By 'giving in' on the racism of early Kant she expects no one from the anti Kant camp to challenge her. But challenge we must.

Kleingeld summarise many well known quotes from Kant and concludes:

Step 1: 'Kant defended European colonialism during the 1780s and early 1790s,' ⁶

She then adds as step 2;

'He started to criticize it only during the 1790s' ⁷

However despite changes in tone NOWHERE is Kleingeld able to show Kant arguing that colonialism was morally right. In fact it is strictly against Kant's principles at ALL TIMES that colonialism or racism should be right. There may be 'mitigating circumstances' in respect of the benefits to the abused but that in no way is an argument that it is right. It should always be borne in mind that Kant lectured in law and so these are not for him obscure distinctions. If Kant ever argued that racism or colonialism was right it would be right in the world of perpetual peace. When Napoleon reintroduced slavery he could only do it on condition that slavery did not exist under French domestic law. Consequently Black people were forbidden to enter France as they would immediately be freed. This prevented Dumas' grandmother from coming to France despite her husband being a French noble. Slavery laws were obviously a great threat to the new found freedoms in France where feudal rights - a European form of slavery - had just been abolished or reformed in many places. Such laws would also be a potential opportunity for a dictator like Napoleon. If the laws of slavery existed domestically under the French code, it could in the event be applied to French citizens and no one trusted Napoleon that much. While colonialism may be inevitable it did not belong in Kant's world of perpetual peace.

In order to understand the correct place of these statements of Kant's, we have to appreciate the 'engine of history' in Kant's work.

⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose - 1784*, Delphi Classics (Delphi Publishing Ltd, 2017).

⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace* (United Kingdom: Delphi Classics, 2017).

⁶ Kleingeld, "Kant's Second Thoughts on Colonialism," 45.

⁷ Ibid.

Kant's Engine of History:

Kant follows on from Ferguson who wrote:

‘Without the rivalry of nations, and the practice of war, civil society itself could scarcely have found an object, or a form. Mankind might have traded without any formal convention, but they cannot be safe without a national concert.’⁸

In Kant's words:

‘Without these asocial qualities (far from admirable in themselves) which cause the resistance inevitably encountered by each individual as he furthers his self-seeking pretensions, man would live an Arcadian, pastoral existence of perfect concord, self sufficiency and mutual love. But all human talents would remain hidden for ever in a dormant state, and men, as good-natured as the sheep they tended, would scarcely render their existence more valuable than that of their animals. The end for which they were created, their rational nature, would be an unfilled void,’⁹

It should be abundantly clear that Kant throughout was horrified by war and did not endorse it which did not prevent him or Ferguson from seeing it as the necessary engine of change. If one takes this view seriously then it is war and its horrors that teaches man higher principles, and in these terms the French revolutionary wars can be seen as part of the divine providence bringing about an appreciation of higher values. The abolition of slavery can be seen as part of this process. In these circumstances, 1794 et seq, to speak sympathetically of slavery would not be defending the status quo but seeking to turn the clock back, attempting to stand in the way of human progress.

Does this mean that in his vision of ‘perpetual peace’ he expected it to be achieved by rational discourse? This would be a contradiction at a fundamental level of his theory of social change. To follow the engine of history: If the world wide constitution of perpetual peace was to be achieved it would be achieved after many travails of warfare. But what wars? An obvious answer would be wars of genocide against all other races. At the end of which Man (white men- last race standing) would realise that genocidal wars must be stopped and a better way of ordering international relations found.

Conclusions:

Bernasconi has insisted that historians of philosophy must show more respect to the environment of the times of an author. This is not at all to suggest that one can explain Kant's racism away by the contemporary attitudes of his time as Kant, just as Hume did, defended his views against harsh criticism. However we should not impose contemporary interpretations and issues onto historical figures. Bernasconi writes: ‘Historians of philosophy cannot operate in that way and still claim to be writing history.’¹⁰

⁸ Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society, Eighth Edition*, 1767, <https://www.scribd.com/book/187334724/An-Essay-on-the-History-of-Civil-Society-Eighth-Edition-Part-1>, sect 4.

⁹ Kant, *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose - 1784* 4th proposition.

¹⁰ Bernasconi, ‘Kant's Third Thoughts on Race,’ 293.

One of the greatest weaknesses of Kleingeld's view and similar apologetics is that they require Kant's contemporary listeners to be slightly stupid and not to see the apparent and blatant contradiction between his 'ethical' view and his view on races and to bother to bring it to Kant's attention. It is one thing for Kant to 'overlook' it, quite another for all Kant's listeners not to notice and many of them were both learned and hostile to Kant. This would suggest that at the time no contradiction was seen and that his listeners understood Kant's views to be coherent whether they agreed with them or not. So pace Benrasconi this suggests that a coherent interpretation was available and we hope to have recovered it.

Our thesis has been that Kleingeld has moved one stage of mourning from Denial to Bargaining, that she has abandoned any defence of early Kant even to the point of defaming him in order to defend him in later years. Like an expert lawyer she 'copped a plea': her client admits he was an early racist but he has reformed and begs the mercy of the court of public opinion, or more mundanely or more typically - her client accepts a manslaughter charge on condition that the murder allegations are withdrawn.

It has also been argued that insufficient attention has been paid to the presence of French revolutionary soldiers and their proselytising of the revolutionary ideals, the French abolition of slavery in 1794 and its effects on all parties in Germany. It would have been unwise for anyone not to bend a little with the wind in terms of external presentations.

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