

# Kant's Second Thoughts on Colonialism

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## Introduction

Kant is widely regarded as a fierce critic of colonialism. In *Toward Perpetual Peace* and the *Metaphysics of Morals*, for example, he forcefully condemns European conduct in the colonies as a flagrant violation of the principles of right. His earlier views on colonialism have not yet received much detailed scrutiny, however. In this essay, I aim to show that Kant actually *endorsed and justified* European colonialism until the early 1790s, before becoming very critical of it in *Toward Perpetual Peace*. I argue that Kant's initial endorsement and his subsequent criticism of colonialism are closely related to his changing views on race because his endorsement of a racial hierarchy played a crucial role in his justification of European colonialism. During the process of developing his legal and political philosophy, in the mid-1790s, he gave up his defense of colonialism, in favor of a more egalitarian, republican, and cosmopolitan conception of the proper relationship among peoples.

## 2.1 Does Kant Defend Colonialism in the 'Idea for a Universal History'?

In his 1784 essay, 'Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Perspective', Kant claims that 'our part of the world', namely, Europe, 'will probably someday give laws [*Gesetze geben*] to all the others [viz., other

parts of the world]’ (IaG 8:29). The claim is a parenthetical comment that is not further explained in the essay. In the light of Kant’s unambiguous criticisms of colonialism in later texts, some commentators have resisted a literal interpretation as a prediction or endorsement of worldwide European colonialism. Several alternative readings are possible. Todd Hedrick has suggested, for example, that Kant’s remark should not be read as referring to the probability of European world legislation. Rather, he proposes, Kant meant something analogous to the current post-colonial condition, where, as Hedrick puts it, ethnically white nations of the world *dominate* without directly *ruling or occupying* other parts of the world.<sup>1</sup> Béatrice Longuenesse has mentioned another possibility, namely, that Kant’s claim might have to be taken as meaning that Europe will spread its *model* of legislation (in form or content) across the world, instead of European countries dictating laws elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> These possibilities cannot be excluded out of hand, especially in the light of Kant’s well-known criticisms of colonialism.

Nevertheless, *prima facie* there is some reason to doubt these non-literal readings. There is no other text in which Kant uses ‘*Gesetze geben*’ (or *gesetzgeben*, *Gesetzgebung*) for ‘dominating without ruling’ or ‘spreading the model of legislation’ (presumably by having the European model of legislation adopted by peoples elsewhere in the world). It generally simply means ‘giving laws’. If we take it to mean law-giving, the passage under consideration means nothing less than that Europeans will probably give laws to the rest of the world at some point in the future, which would amount to a form of colonial rule.

If Kant here designates European legislation for the rest of the world as a probable end result of history, this is of course highly significant. In the ‘Idea for a Universal History’, he sketches an idea of *progress*, according to which history is moving towards a ‘cosmopolitan condition’ of an international federation with coercive powers. Given this teleological argumentative context, the remark cannot be downplayed as ‘merely’ a prediction of an unfortunate but empirically probable future state of the world. Kant is here sketching an idea of the ‘final end’ of history, and if

<sup>1</sup> Todd Hedrick, ‘Race, Difference, and Anthropology in Kant’s Cosmopolitanism’, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 46 (2008): 245–68; here 262.

<sup>2</sup> Béatrice Longuenesse, ‘Kant’s Imperfect Cosmopolitanism’, in *The Cosmopolitan Ideal*, ed. Hilary Ballon (New York: NYU Press, forthcoming). She does not claim that this interpretation is the correct one but mentions it as a possibility.

the remark is to be taken literally, it means that this historical *telos* is supposed to ('probably') include European legislation for all other parts of the world. In other words, we need to consider the possibility that Kant's ideal 'cosmopolitan condition' should be interpreted as a condition of European colonial rule.

If the comment is read literally, the passage contradicts Kant's powerful critique of colonialism found in *Toward Perpetual Peace* and the *Metaphysics of Morals*. This, in turn, raises more questions. For we should then ask what to make of the discrepancy between Kant's remark in the 'Idea for a Universal History' and his colonialism critique. Is Kant contradicting himself—is this remark the result of a careless formulation or of confusion, perhaps? Or was Kant's position ambivalent? Thomas McCarthy has argued for this second view, claiming that Kant condemned colonialism and slavery on the grounds of morality and right, even while regarding them as necessary for the spread of civilization and right throughout the world.<sup>3</sup> Or—and this is an important third possibility—did Kant perhaps change his views over time? Determining which of these three alternative interpretations is the right one requires us to place Kant's remark within a broader interpretive context. Whether Kant's seeming endorsement of colonialism is the result of a careless formulation, whether he simultaneously welcomed and criticized colonialism, or whether he initially endorsed it and later criticized it can be established only against the broader hermeneutical background of his views on colonialism and related issues.

I argue in favor of the third interpretation, namely, the view that Kant defended European colonialism during the 1780s and early 1790s, and that he started to criticize it only during the 1790s. Kant's texts of the 1780s and early 1790s contain many more passages in which he defends or at least clearly condones European colonialism overseas, while they do not—to my knowledge—contain any critique of it. Conversely, his texts dating from the mid and late 1790s contain many trenchant criticisms of European colonialism and no defenses. This solid pattern gives us reason to reject the first and second interpretations. The texts display a chronological pattern indicating that Kant radically changed his views on colonialism in the mid-1790s.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Thomas McCarthy, *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 62.

<sup>4</sup> Although Kant's *Lectures on Physical Geography* were published in 1802, this edition cannot be regarded as reflecting Kant's views around that time. There are well-known problems with the Rink edition that make it difficult to date specific passages; many parts of the

## 2.2 Kant's Defense of Colonialism during the 1780s and Early 1790s

One of Kant's clearest defenses of colonialism is found in his Lectures on Physical Geography (Doenhoff), lectures which he most probably gave in 1782. According to the lecture notes, Kant explained that India would be happier under a stronger form of European colonial rule:

These peoples [viz., in India] deserve a better fate than their current one, because it is a very manageable and easily governed people! The current fate of India depends as little on the French as on the English, but this much is certain, that if they were to be ruled by a European sovereign, the nation would become happier. (VPG Doenhoff 178).

This comment clearly indicates Kant's endorsement, even his active recommendation of European colonial rule: India 'deserves' European colonial rule because it is so 'easily governed', and it would be 'happier' as a result.

In Kant's characterizations of the different 'races', we find many passages in which he posits a connection between racial differences and politically relevant mental and agential characteristics.<sup>5</sup> Consider the following passages: 'Americans and Negroes cannot govern themselves. Thus, [they] serve only as slaves.' Blacks are said to 'adopt the culture of bondsmen but not of free men, and they are incapable of leading themselves. Children' (Sketches for the Lectures on Anthropology, from the 1780s, R 15:877–8). The 'Hindus' are said to be superior to the Negroes because they can be educated, but they can be educated only in the arts, not in the sciences and other endeavors that require the use of abstract concepts. They are hence incapable of being magistrates, and incapable of genuine freedom and virtue (877). The 'white' race is superior and the only non-deficient race: 'the race of whites contains all incentives and talents' (878). This racial hierarchy is repeated in many other texts. In anthropology lecture notes that probably stem from 1781 to 1782, for example, Kant

text even stem from the pre-Critical period. Because this chapter concerns the development of Kant's views during the Critical period, I build my case on published texts and lecture notes, of which the dates are less in dispute.

<sup>5</sup> In the description of Kant's account of race and racial hierarchy, I draw in part on my article, 'Kant's Second Thoughts on Race', *Philosophical Quarterly* 57 (2007): 573–92, and my book, *Kant and Cosmopolitanism: The Philosophical Ideal of World Citizenship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), chapter 4.

reportedly asserts that Native Americans are the lowest of the four races because they are completely inert, impassive, and incapable of being educated at all. He places the 'Negroes' above them because they are capable of being trained to be slaves (but incapable of other forms of education). Asians have many more talents, but still fewer than whites (VA 25:1187; see also VA Ko 362–5). Kant invokes this racial hierarchy—along with the thesis that non-whites are incapable of governing themselves, incapable of being magistrates, and incapable of genuine freedom, and that whites, by contrast, do have the requisite capabilities—to justify whites' subjecting and governing non-whites through colonial rule. Kant's account contains a mix of paternalism (as with India, which would be 'happier' as a European colony) and instrumentalization (as with Native Americans and blacks, whose alleged 'purpose' is to serve as slaves).

Consistent with the characterizations quoted, Kant discusses the activities of Europeans in the overseas colonies without criticism. In his 1777 paper, 'Of the different races of human beings', he discusses colonial slavery in a very matter-of-fact way: 'one makes use of the red slaves (Americans) in Surinam only for labors in the house because they are too weak for field labor, for which one uses Negroes' (VRM 2:438n.). Surinam was a Dutch colony, and the term 'one' (in 'one uses Negroes') adopts the perspective of the slave owners and their equals. There is no hint of criticism of either colonialism or slavery here. A similar perspective is adopted in the following passage from the 1782 Doenhoff Lectures on Physical Geography; note again the use of 'one' and, in this passage, the salient implicit contrast between 'slave' and 'human being':

The Mandinka are the very most desirable among all Negroes up to the Gambia river, because they are the most hardworking ones. These are the ones that one prefers to seek for slaves, because these can tolerate labour in the greatest heat that no human being [*Mensch*] can endure. Each year 20,000 of this Negro nation have to be bought to replace the decline of them in America, where they are used to work on the spice trees and in general on the entire *établissement*. One gets the Negroes by having them catch each other, and one has to seize them with force. (VPG Doenhoff: 189)

Conceptually speaking, it is possible to imagine a defense of colonialism without racism or a defense of racism without colonialism. In Kant's case, however, the two clearly go hand in hand. As is clear from the passages cited, he characterizes the different races in terms of their (in)

capacity to govern themselves politically and in terms of their use—use, that is, to white European colonial rulers.

Kant's characterizations of the races are no isolated phenomenon in his work, nor are they prejudices unthinkingly copied from his contemporaries. To the contrary, Kant devoted a good deal of explicit philosophical attention to the issue of race. As Robert Bernasconi has pointed out,<sup>6</sup> Kant was one of the first theorists to attempt to determine the concept of race (as distinct from 'species' and 'variety'). He wrote several essays on the topic in the 1770s and 1780s, especially the essays 'Of the different races of human beings' (1775, 1777), 'Determination of the concept of a human race' (1785), and 'On the use of teleological principles in philosophy' (1788). His draft notes and the lecture notes taken by his students provide us with many additional materials. Kant's lectures on physical geography, and his annual anthropology lectures in particular, in their section on the characteristics of the races, form a rich source for his hierarchical conception of the races during the 1780s and the early 1790s.<sup>7</sup> Evidently, Kant considered the issue to be of considerable interest and importance.

In the texts and lectures from the 1780s and early 1790s, Kant connects race with common ancestry and certain physical properties. He defines racial features as traits that are necessarily passed on to offspring, such that procreation with a human of a different race leads to a blending of characteristics (e.g., BBM 8:99–100). This definition of race is a physiological one because it is an account in terms of the development of different bodily traits, such as skin color, hair structure, and the like. It does not as such imply that racial differences are associated with differences in intellectual or agential capacities, and by far the largest portion of Kant's articles on race deal with physical aspects alone. In fact, Kant's 1785 essay, 'Determination of the concept of a human race', deals with physiology only and does not betray any endorsement of a racial hierarchy on Kant's part.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Bernasconi, 'Who Invented the Concept of Race? Kant's Role in the Enlightenment Construction of Race', in *Race*, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 11–36.

<sup>7</sup> The last series of anthropology lectures of which we still have student notes are lecture notes dating from 1791 to 1792 (the Anthropology Dohna Wundlacken). Before the 1770s, too, Kant made derogatory comments about non-Europeans, but I restrict my discussion to the period after Kant had started writing about the concept of race as such.

Because of the physiological focus of Kant's articles on the concept of race, his hierarchical account of the races in terms of intellectual and agential characteristics surfaces only occasionally in these publications. As mentioned, however, this racial hierarchy is worked out in greater detail in the 1780s' anthropology lectures, in the section on the 'character' of the races. During this decade, this section contains Kant's portrayal of whites as the only non-deficient race and his account of the various deficits of the other so-called races. Kant's division of the subject matter was deliberate. In a letter to Johann Jacob Engel dated July 4, 1779, he explicitly distinguished the 'physical' account of race from the 'moral characterization' of the races, stating that the latter could be 'attached' to the former (B 10:256). In neither the articles on race nor the anthropology lectures, however, does he make any attempt to explain how the alleged intellectual and agential characteristics of the races are *related* to the physiological aspects of race.

Not only did Kant consider 'race' to be a topic of explicit philosophical concern to which he devoted several of his publications, he also defended his theory against the attacks of some of the leading intellectuals of his time. Kant's theory of race was strongly criticized, for example, by Georg Forster (1754–94), who had sailed around the world with Captain Cook.<sup>8</sup> On the basis of his experiences with people elsewhere on earth, Forster had published an extensive critique in a leading journal, the *Teutsche Merkur*.<sup>9</sup> Kant, in response, persists in endorsing European colonialism and non-white slavery. He published an extensive reply to Forster in his 1788 article 'On the use of teleological principles in philosophy.' Most of their discussion concerned the theory and methodology of biology. Forster had also explicitly criticized hierarchical accounts of race,<sup>10</sup> however, and in his reply, Kant reasserted his endorsement of a racial hierarchy—incidentally, he wrote this text only months after having published the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Among other things, Kant claims that people from India and Africa are unable ever to become anything

<sup>8</sup> Other notable early critics were Johann Gottfried Herder and Johann Daniel Metzger. For further discussion of their objections, see my *Kant and Cosmopolitanism*, chapter 4.

<sup>9</sup> Georg Forster, 'Something more on the human races', in *Georg Forsters Werke*, ed. Academy of Sciences of the GDR, later Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences, vol. 8 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1958–).

<sup>10</sup> Forster, 'Something more on the human races', 154.

more than drifters. Native Americans, in turn, are even lower in the hierarchy: this race is

too weak for hard labour, too indifferent for industry and incapable of any culture—although there is enough of it as example and encouragement nearby [namely, the example of the European colonial settlers]—ranks still far below even the Negro, who stands on the lowest of all the other steps that we have named as differences of the races. (TPP 8:176)

With this last remark, Kant assumes that his readers were aware of his earlier work on race. Whites are not ‘characterized’ in this line-up, but again it is Kant’s clear assumption that they occupy the top rung of the racial hierarchy. In a footnote, moreover, Kant endorses an anti-abolitionist pamphlet, on the grounds that a proposal to use freed slaves as laborers in the colonies would not work because blacks lack a ‘drive to activity’ (TPP 8:174n.). In short, instead of changing his views on racial hierarchy in the face of articulate challenges from leading intellectuals of his time, Kant persists in endorsing European colonialism and non-white slavery.

Against the broader background of his explicit and repeated defenses of colonialism and the racial characterizations that support it, Kant’s remark in the ‘Idea of Universal History’ turns out to be just one passage among many that take European colonialism for granted. Not surprisingly, we find no explicit critique of colonialism and associated practices in Kant’s texts dating from this period.<sup>11</sup> His claim that Europe will probably eventually legislate for the other parts of the world can and should be read in the most literal sense.

We still encounter the connection between colonialism and race in Kant’s 1792 lectures on physical geography and in the anthropology

<sup>11</sup> In her book, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*, Susan Buck-Morss rightly argues that current scholarship in history and philosophy should pay more attention to colonialism and slavery when it discusses historical figures. Buck-Morss does not devote sufficient attention, however, to the connection between early modern European philosophers’ endorsement of slavery or colonialism and their frequent endorsement of white supremacist *race* hierarchies. This may stem from her conviction that, historically, racism was the consequence of slavery instead of its cause, which might make racism look like the wrong problem to focus on. But her neglect of the role of racism leads her to ask repeatedly how the philosophers she discusses could live with themselves, given that their endorsement of slavery and colonialism so often flagrantly contradicted their philosophical ideals of freedom and equality. The answer in many cases, as in Kant’s, lies in the mediating and justifying role of racism. Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2009).



lectures of the same period (VA Ko 362–5). In the Dohna Lectures on Physical Geography, Kant claims, for example, that the indigenous peoples of the Americas in general are an ‘*inferior* kind of human’: they have no stamina for work, and they rarely have a civil condition. Kant is not certain that the European colonial powers will be successful here. He comments: ‘most likely one will never be able to bring the Canadian savages into a lawful condition’ (VPG Dohna 236, 238). Again, the perspective here is that of the European power attempting to subsume the savages under their colonial laws (‘*one* will never be able to *bring them* . . .’). Kant’s description of practices in the colonies is still just as matter-of-fact in tone as his earlier comments on the kinds of slaves that ‘one uses’ for various tasks in Surinam. In the next section, I show that Kant radically changed his mind on the matter of colonialism in the mid-1790s. For purposes of comparison, then, let me end this section with a passage from the Dohna Lectures on Physical Geography—a passage that has a striking counterpart in *Toward Perpetual Peace*. Consider this description of the ‘Sugar Islands,’ from Kant’s 1792 lectures on physical geography:

Much more important [than Cuba] is St. Domingo. On the French part of this island alone there are 350,000 Negroes,<sup>12</sup> on Jamaica 200,000, on Martinique, Guadeloupe, the Grenadines, the number of Negroes varies very much; it is the proper standard of wealth. The old Indian inhabitants (Caribs, now still living only on St. Vincent) can tolerate this kind of labour as little as the Europeans, only Negroes were created for it. Puerto Rico is not cultivated much—as the Spanish run things everywhere. As long the soil stays rich (*fett*) this will be all right, but as soon as it needs fertilizer, the yield will diminish greatly. For only the old fertile soil (black earth) produces the greatest profit from these islands. (VPG Dohna 241)

Kant here educates his students on the use of these territories for Europeans, and, as on earlier occasions, he depicts the indigenous peoples as physically weak.<sup>13</sup> Blacks, on the other hand, are said to have been ‘created for’ the harsh labor conditions on the sugar plantations. (Similarly evoking teleological purposiveness, Kant claims that blacks ‘seem to be made to serve others,’ according to the 1791–2 anthropology lectures, VA Ko 363). Kant explains to his students the number of black slaves owned

<sup>12</sup> Current estimates are closer to 450,000, of whom roughly two-thirds were African-born. The death rate among the slaves was so high that the slaveholders continued to request new shipments of enslaved Africans.

<sup>13</sup> Whites, too, are called weak, but Kant holds that they make up for this by their superior talents, whereas Native Americans lack such.

on the islands—and then proceeds to call this the ‘proper standard of wealth.’ He informs his students about the kind of soil that yields the highest ‘profit’ from these islands—again, that is, profit for the European colonial powers. There is no trace of criticism; on the contrary, the alleged purpose of the very existence of blacks seems to serve as a justification for their use as slaves in the colonies.

### 2.3 Kant’s Second Thoughts on Colonialism

Not long after these Dohna lectures on physical geography were held, Kant had second thoughts. The tone and content of his description of the ‘Sugar Islands,’ for example, in *Toward Perpetual Peace* (published in 1795), is radically different from that of the passage just quoted. His description now contains a sharp criticism of the violence perpetrated by the Europeans in general, and on the Sugar Islands in particular:

The worst of this (or, considered from the standpoint of a moral judge, the best) is that they [viz., the European commercial states] do not even profit from this violence; that all these trading companies are on the verge of collapse; that the Sugar Islands, this place of the cruellest and most calculated slavery, yield no true profit but serve only a mediate and indeed not very laudable purpose, namely, training sailors for warships, and so, in turn, carrying on wars in Europe (ZeF 8:359).

Instead of providing information regarding the kind of slaves needed and most useful for labor in these colonies, Kant now condemns the European conduct on the very same islands as reprehensible violence and cruelty. Instead of reporting on the kind of soil that yields the largest profit, he writes that morally speaking, it is a good thing that these colonies are not really profitable at all. Rather, the consequences of colonialism he mentions are all negative. Kant no longer identifies with the perspective of the colonial power (‘one uses Negroes’) but distances himself from it through the consistent use of ‘they’ (‘they do not even profit’).

In order to assess the extent and nature of Kant’s change of mind, let us look more closely at his stance on colonialism, as found in *Toward Perpetual Peace* and the *Metaphysics of Morals*.

In the Doctrine of Right, Kant defines a ‘colony’ in a way that makes the colonial relation necessarily unjust. He describes a colony as a people under the imperial rule of a so-called ‘mother’ state and condemns the resulting relationship as a violation of right. He gives the example of the relationship

between Great Britain and Ireland, and between ancient Athens and some of the Greek islands.<sup>14</sup> The relevant passage is found in a discussion in which Kant argues that victorious states ought not to turn conquered states into colonies:

A defeated state or its subjects do not lose their civil freedom through the conquest of the country, so that the state would be degraded [*abgewürdigt*] to a colony and its subjects to bondage; for if they did the war would have been a *punitive war*, which is self-contradictory.—A *colony* or province is a people that indeed has its own constitution, its own legislation, and its own land, on which those who belong to another state are only foreigners even though this other state has supreme *executive* authority over the colony or province.—The state having that executive authority is called the *mother state*, and the daughter state, though ruled by it, still governs itself (by its own parliament, possibly with a viceroy presiding over it) (*civitas hybrida*). This was the relation Athens had with respect to various islands and that Great Britain now has with regard to Ireland. (MdS 6:348)

It is clear from this citation that Kant is very critical of this process: becoming a colony in this sense involves a reprehensible loss of dignity (an '*Abwürdigung*'). The point of the passage, after all, is precisely that no country is allowed to subject defeated countries or peoples in such a way that they become colonies.

In the light of the rest of the doctrine of right of the *Metaphysics of Morals*, it is easy to understand why Kant would regard colonial status as objectionable. Only a republican state—that is, a political system of collective self-legislation by the citizens through their representatives, with the executive being subject to this law—is fully in accord with the innate human right to freedom (MdS 6:340). Being subject to the rule of another state—the defining feature of colonial status—is incompatible with his ideal of political autonomy. As Kant put it in 'On the Common Saying', a paternalistic government is the 'greatest conceivable *despotism*' (GTP 8:290–1).

One might wonder, though, whether Kant really extends his rejection of colonialism to the case of non-Europeans. He illustrates his point by referring to the cases of Athens and Great Britain. But a skeptic could object that Kant may well have endorsed egalitarian, anti-colonialist political principles while still refusing, on the basis of racist presuppositions,

<sup>14</sup> For more on the historical context of this passage, see the contribution by Anthony Pagden in this volume.

to apply these principles to non-Europeans. After all, this is exactly the pattern we find in the 1780s. According to Kant's 1785 *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, it is a core moral principle that one ought not to use other human beings as mere means, but around the same time Kant failed to extend this core moral principle to the non-European slave population. By definition, all human races share the essential characteristics of the species, and this obviously includes its rational nature. Hence, Kant's 1780s' defense of slavery and colonialism flagrantly contradicts the moral principles he develops in the *Groundwork* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*.<sup>15</sup> And if this self-contradiction did not bother Kant in his 1780s' lectures and publications, something analogous might be true in the case of his mid-1790s' prohibition of colonialism. We need strong textual evidence before we are justified in assuming that the texts condemn colonialism outside Europe.

This explicit evidence exists, however. There are many passages in which Kant explicitly extends the principles of right to humans on all continents, and in which he clearly draws the pertinent conclusions regarding European colonialism. For example, in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, he criticizes the European practice of fraudulently buying land overseas by deceiving the local population (MdS 6:266). In considering whether 'we' are authorized to establish colonies through violence or deceptive buying constructions, Kant asks

whether, when neither nature nor chance but just our own will brings us into the neighbourhood of a people that holds out no prospect of a civil union with it, we should not be authorized to found colonies [*Colonien*], by force if need be, in order to establish a civil union with them and bring these human beings (savages) into a rightful condition (as with the American Indians, the Hottentots and the inhabitants of New Holland); or (which is not much better), to found colonies by fraudulent purchase of their land, and so become owners of their land, making use of our superiority without regard for their first possession. (MdS 6:266)

Kant's answer is that this consequentialist justification is a thinly veiled case of using good ends to justify any means whatsoever, and his condemnation is unambiguous: 'Such a way of acquiring land is therefore to be repudiated.' (MdS 6:266). His mention of indigenous peoples on several other continents indicates that the principle at issue here also applies to

<sup>15</sup> For the full argument that there is a contradiction between Kant's moral principles and his views on racial hierarchy, see my 'Kant's Second Thoughts on Race.'

non-Europeans. Clearly, Kant rejects what we understand by the more recent term 'colonialism', namely, the practice of forming colonies in a way that involves an unjust and unequal relationship between the colony and the mother state—whether it concerns the Irish or Native Americans.

Furthermore, the new category of public right that Kant introduces in *Toward Perpetual Peace*, namely, 'cosmopolitan right', is a direct manifestation of Kant's new position on race. He now explicitly assigns full juridical status to humans on all continents (ZeF 8:357–60; MdS 6:352–3), and his discussion of the normative requirements of cosmopolitan right forms the theoretical context for his condemnation of colonialism as well as for his positive support for the right of indigenous peoples to defend their ways of life against encroachments by others. Cosmopolitan right is premised on the interaction among humans on all continents and serves to regulate the interactions between states and foreign individuals. Among other things, it protects non-state peoples against involuntary incorporation into states, and it prohibits colonialism. Under the heading of 'cosmopolitan right', Kant now *criticizes* the colonial conquest of inhabited parts of the world by Europeans, and he is equally critical of the enslavement of the existing population and their subjection to European rule.<sup>16</sup>

The core of Kant's conception of cosmopolitan right, as discussed in *Toward Perpetual Peace* and the *Metaphysics of Morals*, is the view that states and individuals have the right to show up at the border to request interaction with other states and their inhabitants, or with non-state peoples, but not a right to enter foreign territory, let alone a right to settle. The addressees have the right to refuse such requests, but not with hostility, and not if it leads to the demise (*Untergang*) of the person who submits the request (ZeF 8:358). Kant's view is that states, non-state peoples, and individuals have an obligation to refrain from unwanted intrusions; that they ought to provide a safe haven for refugees (R 23:173); and that individuals do not have a right to enter foreign territory at will, unless they are granted permission.

In the light of this normative standard set by cosmopolitan right, the colonialist behavior of European states and trading companies is clearly

<sup>16</sup> For a more extensive discussion of cosmopolitan right, see my *Kant and Cosmopolitanism*, chapter 3.

reprehensible. In his notes for *Toward Perpetual Peace*, after having discussed European behavior in Africa, America, and Asia, Kant concludes:

The principles underlying the supposed lawfulness of appropriating newly discovered and purportedly barbaric or irreligious lands, as goods belonging to no one, without the consent of the inhabitants and even subjugating them as well, are absolutely contrary to cosmopolitan right. (R 23:174)

And in a famous passage from *Toward Perpetual Peace*:

If one compares with this [viz., with the principle of cosmopolitan right] the *inhospitable* behaviour of civilized, especially commercial, states in our part of the world, the injustice they show in *visiting* foreign land and peoples (which with them is tantamount to *conquering* them) goes to horrifying lengths. When America, the negro countries, the Spice Islands, the Cape, and so forth were discovered, they were, to them, countries belonging to no one, since they counted the inhabitants as nothing. In the East Indies (Hindustan), they brought in foreign soldiers under the pretext of merely proposing to set up trading posts, but with them oppression of the inhabitants, incitement of the various Indian states to widespread wars, famine, rebellions, treachery, and the whole litany of troubles that oppress the human race. (ZeF 8:358–9).

Note that here that the Americas, Africa, India, ‘and so forth’ are explicitly mentioned. Cosmopolitan right is said to cover indigenous populations on other continents, and not just (‘white’) Europeans. It specifically condemns European colonialist practices.<sup>17</sup>

In the same context, Kant defends the right on the part of China and Japan to be very restrictive in their dealings with foreign trading companies, including Japan’s policy of granting access only to the Dutch and preventing even them from entering the country and having contact with the local population (ZeF 8:359). Kant motivates his endorsement of their policy in terms of the right of the Chinese and Japanese to avoid the ‘litany of troubles’ that would otherwise be caused by European trading companies. He mentions that the Chinese and Japanese knew what they were doing because they had tried contact with Europeans before (ZeF 8:359).

<sup>17</sup> Kant’s comment about the ‘civilized’ states of Europe might be taken to betray that he ‘accepts the imperialist’s premise that the Europeans have a more advanced culture than the people they have conquered’. Cp. Allen W. Wood, *Kant’s Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 299. But it is not clear that this is indeed the case because the statement is not necessarily comparative. It need not mean that states on other continents are not or cannot be civilized.

Kant further argues that it is a violation of cosmopolitan right to conquer areas on other continents if they are inhabited, regardless of whether the people who live there have formed a state, and regardless of their way of life. As Sankar Muthu has shown,<sup>18</sup> in the *Metaphysics of Morals* Kant allows for a diversity of ways of life (hunting, pastoral, agricultural) without ranking them on a hierarchical scale, and he explicitly states that the choice is entirely at the discretion of those involved (MdS 6:266). Moreover, they have the right to assert their chosen way of life against others, according to Kant:

Can two neighbouring peoples (or families) resist each other in adopting a certain kind of use of land, for example, can a hunting people resist a pasturing people or a farming people, or the latter resist a people that wants to plant orchards, and so forth? Certainly, since as long as they keep within their boundaries the way they want to *live* on their land is a matter that is up to their own discretion (*res merae facultatis*). (MdS 6:266)

Similarly, encroaching on the land used by others is forbidden, even if they use the land only relatively lightly:

If the settlement is made so far from where [a] people resides that there is no encroachment on anyone's use of his land, the right to settle is not open to doubt. But if these people are shepherds or hunters (like the Hottentots, the Tungusi, or most of the American Indian nations), who depend for their sustenance on great open regions, this settlement may not take place by force but only by contract, and indeed by a contract that does not take advantage of the ignorance of those inhabitants with respect to ceding their lands. (MdS 6:353)

The fact that Kant mentions the importance of contracts and the informed consent of Native Americans, Africans, and Asians indicates a fundamental change of view. It indicates that, by 1795, he regards their interests and claims as imposing a normative constraint on the behavior of Europeans. As long as he regarded slavery and colonial rule as fitting for non-Europeans, he did not see their consent as important at all, instead approaching non-whites with a mix of paternalism (as he did in the case of India) and instrumentalization (as he did in the case of slavery).

Kant started to voice unambiguous opposition to chattel slavery too. In his notes for *Toward Perpetual Peace* (1794–5), he criticizes the slavery

<sup>18</sup> Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 187–8.

of non-Europeans and calls it a grave violation of cosmopolitan right (R 23:173–4). He explicitly censures the slave trade (‘trade in Negroes’) as a violation of the cosmopolitan right of blacks (R 23:174). Similarly, he criticizes the fact that the inhabitants of America were treated as objects belonging to no one and ‘were displaced or enslaved’ soon after Europeans reached the continent (R 23:173–4).

Consistent with his powerful criticisms of colonialism, Kant’s work of the mid and late 1790s no longer mentions Europeans legislating for other parts of the world. Rather, Kant defends the normative ideal of the state as a republic, a self-legislative, self-determining union of citizens, and he no longer argues that other races are incapable of achieving this. Importantly, in the published version of the *Anthropology* lectures, Kant omits any characterization of the races (whereas he does still provide one for the sexes, for example) and denies that race has any ‘pragmatic’ relevance (APH 7:120).

Instead of his earlier claims that Africans and Native Americans cannot govern themselves and that Europe will probably eventually legislate for them, Kant now envisions a world in which peoples on different continents establish peaceful relations with each other. He sketches a vision of a world in which ‘distant parts of the world can enter peaceably into relations with one another, which can ultimately become publicly lawful and so finally bring the human race ever closer to a cosmopolitan constitution’ (ZeF 8:358). He expresses the hope that all states of the world will form a union, ‘for a lawful settlement of their disputes (by analogy with a universal state)’ (ZeF 8:379), and he writes that this ‘state of peoples’ (*Völkerstaat*) would ‘finally encompass all of the peoples of the earth’ (ZeF 8:357). (In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, he similarly writes that a true perpetual peace is possible only ‘in a universal union of states (analogous to that by which a people becomes a state)’, MdS 6:350). All peoples of the earth are to strive towards a single union of states, which will settle their conflicts at a federal level, instead of Europe being mentioned as the one continent in charge. In short, the texts indicate a pervasive change of Kant’s view of the issue of colonialism.

## 2.4 Permissible Colonies

‘Colonialism’ refers to the political subjection of a territory and its population to a ruling ‘mother state’. Using this terminology, we can say that



according to Kant's account in *Toward Perpetual Peace* and the *Metaphysics of Morals*, there can be no acceptable form of colonialism. Nevertheless, there can be acceptable ways of forming colonies, namely, in a somewhat different sense of 'colony'. If 'colony' is taken in the social sense of an ethnic settlement, then, given strict conditions, colonies are permissible. For the sake of completeness, and in order to avoid terminological misunderstandings, let me briefly comment on Kant's view on permissible forms of colonies.

In the unobjectionable sense, 'colony' refers to a group of people from one country who settle abroad. 'Colony', in this sense, does not necessarily refer to a political relationship. It refers to an ethnic group without political statehood, such as a group of immigrants maintaining cultural or personal ties with their country of origin but following the laws of the country they settled in. In this sense, Kant could speak of, say, a German colony in Russia.

In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant writes that there is nothing inherently wrong with admitting colonists (*Colonisten*) into a country. It is permissible to admit foreigners who wish to settle on your territory, as long as this does not infringe on the private property of the inhabitants who already live there. Kant writes:

The *lord of the land* [*Landesherr*, i.e., the sovereign in the quality of ruler over a territory] has the right to encourage *immigration* and settling by foreigners (colonists) [*Colonisten*], even though his native subjects [*Landeskinder*] might look askance at this, provided that their private ownership of land is not curtailed by it. (MdS 6:338)

Kant's comment did not concern some merely abstract point of principle or a phenomenon overseas. Colonists and colonies in this sense were a live issue in Prussia at the time, as Prussia had a policy of very actively promoting immigration. It attracted foreigners from all over Europe, by the tens of thousands, in an effort to populate its uninhabited areas and newly drained marshes. Kant similarly regards colonial settlements in the other direction (that is, emigration) as permissible on the condition that the settlement is contractually and justly arranged (MdS 6:353).

There are even, on Kant's account, unobjectionable ways for colonists to form a body politic. A group of settlers may come across a genuinely uninhabited territory, finding land that is unused, unoccupied, not yet acquired by anyone. This would allow them to form a colony without

violating anyone's rights (MdS 6:353), but it would be a colony not in the political sense of an unequal political relationship to a mother country, but in the social sense of a settlement of people from the same country of origin.

From Kant's comments in *Toward Perpetual Peace* and the *Metaphysics of Morals*, it is clear that he does not take this to be the standard case when it comes to European conduct overseas. Rather, Europeans tended to appropriate territories abroad through violence and deception and to maintain colonial relations of a reprehensible kind. Nevertheless, for any discussion of Kant's views on colonies, it is important to acknowledge that there is a kind of 'colony' that Kant regards as permissible. The normative evaluation of the establishment and maintenance of colonies varies, depending on the sense of colony concerned and the circumstances of the case.

## 2.5 Some Worries Regarding the Clear Demarcation between Kant's Early and Late Views

The account I have defended in this essay might appear vulnerable to the objection that Kant's change of mind on colonialism was less radical than I have made it appear. First, against the claim that Kant's later rejection of colonialism was unambiguous, one might point to the passage in the *Metaphysics of Morals* in which Kant claims that the sovereign has the right to deport a criminal citizen 'to a province outside the country', where he does 'not enjoy any of the rights of a citizen' (MdS 6:338). Because Kant sometimes equates 'province' and 'colony', one might be tempted to read this passage as an implicit endorsement of colonialism.<sup>19</sup> After all, how could Kant regard it as justified for a sovereign to deport criminal citizens to a province abroad if he does not endorse the sovereign's having colonies in the first place?

Assuming, but only for the sake of argument, that 'province' here indeed means 'colony', the answer lies in Kant's broader commitments in the Doctrine of Right, especially his rejection of the right to revolution. When Kant wrote the book, there were many countries with colonies.

<sup>19</sup> See the contribution by Pagden in this volume.

Because Kant rejects the right to overthrow one's colonial government, he can consistently combine his criticism of colonialism with a statement regarding the behavior of sovereigns in cases where colonies still exist. His thesis that sovereigns have the right to deport criminals to colonies does not imply that he was convinced there should be colonies, any more than Kant's remark that knightly orders can acquire temporary use rights to land implies that he was convinced there should be knightly orders (MdS 6:324).

Two other objections concern my earlier defense of the thesis that Kant abandoned his commitment to a racial hierarchy in the mid-1790s. Given the close connection between Kant's endorsement of a racial hierarchy and his defense of colonialism, if he did not actually drop the racial hierarchy, then this would also cast some doubt on my thesis that he abandoned his endorsement of colonialism. Robert Bernasconi defends the thesis that Kant never shed his racism. Although Bernasconi now concedes that Kant's position on slavery became somewhat less emphatic during the mid-1790s,<sup>20</sup> he downplays the difference. The most salient difficulty for my thesis that the change was radical, Bernasconi believes, is the fact that Kant already voiced opposition to the slave trade in 1792, that is, before the moment when, on my account, he changed his view. Second, Bernasconi claims that Kant's decision to republish his texts on race in the late 1790s implies his continued endorsement of a racial hierarchy. If these objections cannot be answered, this blurs my distinction between Kant's views 'before' and 'after' the change.

With regard to the first point, Bernasconi argues that Kant's condemnation of the slave trade in the mid-1790s cannot count as evidence that Kant had second thoughts. This is because Kant already condemned the slave trade in 1792 as morally reprehensible, even though he was, on my interpretation, at that time still committed to a racial hierarchy. Bernasconi calls this 'the most striking problem' for my claim that Kant had second thoughts on race.<sup>21</sup>

If one reads the entire passage in the lecture to which Bernasconi refers, however, the difference between the view expressed here and Kant's later view is actually very clear. In the 1792 lecture, Kant reportedly states that

<sup>20</sup> Robert Bernasconi, 'Kant's Third Thoughts on Race,' in *Reading Kant's Geography*, eds. Stuart Elden and Eduardo Mendieta (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011), 291–318; here 302–3.

<sup>21</sup> Bernasconi, 'Kant's Third Thoughts on Race,' 304.

the trade in blacks is morally wrong, ‘*but*’ that slavery is, all things considered, ‘*nevertheless tolerable*’ in the case of Negroes. Blacks are not any worse off as a result of European involvement, Kant claims, and furthermore, the alternative for the blacks affected by slavery would be execution:

The trade in Negroes is morally reprehensible [*moralisch verwerflich*], to be sure, but it would take place even if there were no Europeans. And moreover, the people whom they now condemn to slavery used to be executed. . . . From this one can see that the sale, the fate of Negroes, [is] nevertheless tolerable. (VPG Dohna 234)

For the purposes of answering Bernasconi’s objection, it is crucial that although Kant calls the slave trade morally reprehensible, he regards it as, *nevertheless*, on balance, *acceptable* in the case of blacks. In later texts, by contrast, Kant rejects the slave trade because it is a violation of the cosmopolitan right of blacks, without claiming that it is nevertheless a tolerable fate for blacks. It is no longer ‘wrong, *but defensible* all things considered’, but simply *wrong* (R 23:174).<sup>22</sup> This is a decisive difference.

The passage does not explain *why* Kant calls the slave trade morally reprehensible, and we should not regard it as self-evident that he does so because he respects blacks as ends in themselves. In principle, it could even be for reasons having to do with whites (for example, by analogy with his infamous condemnation of cruelty to animals as a violation of a direct duty *to oneself*, on the grounds that it tends to weaken one’s natural sympathy, which is a feeling that plays a useful role in the service of one’s duties

<sup>22</sup> Kant continues this comment at 23:174 by stating that the trade in Negroes is not only ‘in itself already a violation of the hospitality of the black people’, but that it ‘becomes even more [of a violation of the hospitality of the black people] for Europe because of its consequences [viz., of the trade in Negroes]’. Bernasconi reads this comment as downplaying the wrongness of the treatment of slaves (302), translating the text as stating that the slave trade ‘is even more of a violation for Europe because of its consequences’. But ‘violation of the hospitality of black people’ is the likely referent of ‘*es*’. (‘Der Negerhandel der schon an sich Verletzung der Hospitalität des Volks der Schwarzen ist wird es noch mehr für Europa durch seine Folgen.’) Rather than downplaying the wrongness of the treatment of slaves, Kant seems to say that slavery is already ‘in itself’ wrong, and that it also has further harmful consequences. The effects Kant mentions are, *inter alia*, that many [African] coastal regions are devastated, that many peoples die from hunger, and that Europeans wage many wars with the sailors trained in the slave trade. Kant then continues, in the next passage, to specify European abuses in America, including the enslavement of Native Americans. So his point is not that the slave trade is less bad than these other wrongs, or that it causes greater wrongs to Europe than to blacks, or that it is somehow less bad because it has other wrongs as its effects. The point is, rather, that the violations of the cosmopolitan right of blacks that are perpetrated by the slave trade, which Kant calls wrong in itself, lead to *even more* wrongs against blacks.

to other humans, MdS 6:443). On the other hand, if Kant's claim that the slave trade is morally reprehensible is indeed a reflection of his attribution of full moral status to blacks, then perhaps his comment expresses the fact that he had just taken one of the first steps onto the path towards his later view. I do not claim that Kant's reconsideration happened overnight, and this passage is indeed one of Kant's last defenses of slavery. Given that there are no similar statements in the 1780s that condemn the slave trade on moral grounds, it is entirely possible that this comment marks the beginning of Kant's process of reconsideration. Either way, the passage does not pose any difficulties for my thesis.

Bernasconi's second argument against my thesis that Kant had 'second thoughts' on the racial hierarchy is the fact that Kant republished his 1770s and 1780s texts on race in the late 1790s. This would be 'strange behaviour for someone who had supposedly renounced the central category promoted in these essays,' he argues.<sup>23</sup> In reply, I would like to point out, first, that the mere fact of republication does not show that Kant endorsed everything contained in these essays. He also reprinted the *Critique of Pure Reason*, for example, with its discussion of morality left intact, even after he had developed his theory of autonomy in the *Groundwork*. Secondly, and more importantly, Kant's defense of a racial hierarchy, and the associated racial characterizations, never constituted the 'central category' of his articles on race to begin with. The central category of those essays, in Kant's eyes, was his determination of the *concept* of race, and he never renounced that concept as such. As a physiological concept, Kant expected it to help solve pre-Mendelian biological questions regarding the heritability of bodily features. The hierarchical account of the different agential and intellectual predispositions that he had earlier associated with race was not part of the *concept* of race, and it never constituted a significant portion of Kant's discussion in these essays. In fact, as mentioned above, Kant regarded the 'moral characterization' of the races as an issue that was entirely distinct from a discussion of the concept of race as a 'physical' notion. Thirdly, in this context it is significant that Kant chose *not to publish* his earlier account of the racial hierarchy in the one place where it did constitute the central category of the discussion, namely in the section on the 'character of the races' in the *Anthropology*

<sup>23</sup> Bernasconi, 'Kant's Third Thoughts,' 300.

*from a pragmatic point of view.* This was the section heading under which Kant standardly expounded his account of racial hierarchy each year, and he still did so in the last lecture series of which we have student notes, dating from 1791 to 1792 (VA Ko 362–5). Tellingly, in the published version of the *Anthropology* (1798), Kant left it out entirely. In the Preface to the work, he now explains that knowledge regarding the human races is ‘only... theoretical knowledge of the world’, not ‘pragmatic’ knowledge (ApH 7:120). ‘Pragmatic’ knowledge is knowledge of ‘what man as a free-acting being makes of himself, or can and should make of himself’ (ApH 7:119). In other words, Kant here denies that race has any relevance in this context. He now seems to reject the very existence of racial characteristics bearing on agency, and he entirely omits the usual treatment of the subject. This confirms that Kant did not give up the *concept* of race as a biological notion, but that he dropped the idea that one could characterize the races in terms of capacities for intellect and agency (what races could—or could not—make of themselves as free-acting beings).

In short, rather than blurring the picture, the full text of Kant’s 1792 comment on the slave trade and the details of his publication behavior actually provide further confirmation that he changed his view on race and colonialism.

What *prompted* Kant to change his mind is a difficult question regarding his intellectual biography that requires further study. I know of no passage in which Kant openly declares that he had been wrong on the issue of colonialism or in which he describes the moment when he first recognized the force of the better argument. The change very likely had much to do with the fact that, in the early 1790s, Kant started seriously to work on legal and political philosophy. He had been much impressed by the French Revolution and the ideals of freedom and equality that lay behind it. Moreover, there was considerable debate at the time about the implications of the ‘rights of man’ for the status of non-Europeans, especially the enslaved Africans working on colonial plantations. In this connection, the 1791–4 self-liberation of the slaves on Saint-Domingue (later Haiti), and the subsequent ‘abolition’ of slavery by the French Jacobins, may have prompted him to rethink his earlier conception of the characteristics of the races.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps the slave revolt led

<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, in the 1794 draft notes for *Towards Perpetual Peace*, we still find a mention of race as a factor that nature allegedly uses to delay human interaction across the globe. But

him to question his claim—quoted above—that Africans seemed to be ‘made to serve others’ (VA Ko 363). Perhaps improved awareness of the gruelling conditions on the plantations and the violence perpetrated by the white slave owners convinced him that colonial slavery was not ‘tolerable for Negroes’ at all. Perhaps there was a delayed effect of the criticisms that others, such as Forster, had directed at his views on race. Or perhaps he finally came to recognize the contradiction between his own account of the principle of morality (most notably, the prohibition on using other human beings as mere means in the hands of others), and his endorsement of colonial slavery. It is not unlikely that it was a combination of factors.

Further research on Kant’s publications, lectures, letters, and drafts from the first half of the 1790s, in their broader historical context, may unearth the keys to a better understanding of the time and circumstances of Kant’s change of mind. This would be a matter of considerable historical, *biographical* interest. In the meantime, however, we should not exaggerate the *philosophical* importance of this open question. As a matter of philosophical argument, we know quite well that there were *good reasons* for Kant, given the principles of his 1780s moral theory and his emerging 1790s political theory, to change his views on colonialism.

## Conclusion

Kant is usually regarded as a vociferous critic of colonialism. This reputation is fully warranted, but only when confined to the period starting in the mid-1790s. In fact, throughout the early 1790s, Kant did not criticize colonialism at all. He endorsed a racial hierarchy related to an alleged set of intellectual and agential deficits on the part of the non-white races that made them unable to govern themselves, and he presented this as a justification of European colonial rule. His sharp and philosophically articulate condemnation of colonialism in his later

in the final version, Kant *removed* any reference to race in his description of what nature does to facilitate human migration (cp. ZeF 8:367 and R 23:170). See Susan Shell, ‘Kant’s Concept of a Human Race’, in *The German Invention of Race*, eds. Sara Eigen and Mark Larrimore (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006), 55–72, here p. 72, n.29.

work, however, especially *Toward Perpetual Peace* and the *Metaphysics of Morals*, clearly shows that Kant had second thoughts on colonialism. In the process of developing his legal and political philosophy, during the mid-1790s, he gave up both his endorsement of a racial hierarchy and his defense of colonialism, in favor of a more egalitarian version of the cosmopolitan ideal.

## Notes

VA Ko: The Dohna-Wundlacken Lectures on Anthropology (1791–2), which have been published in Arnold Kowalewski (ed.), *Die philosophischen Hauptvorlesungen Immanuel Kants. Nach den neu aufgefundenen Kollegheften des Grafen Heinrich zu Dohna-Wundlacken* (München: Rösl, 1924).

VPG Doenhoff: The Doenhoff Lectures on Physical Geography (probably from 1782).

VPG Dohna: The Dohna Lectures on Physical Geography (1792).

The Doenhoff and Dohna Lectures on Physical Geography are scheduled to be published in the Akademie Ausgabe. Werner Stark has already made his transcripts available at <<http://kant.bbaw.de>> accessed February 23, 2014. Page numbers refer to the transcripts. Translations of these lectures are mine.

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