Whose Power? Whose Weakness?: On Robert Kagan's Critique of European Ideology

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1. Robert Kagan's essay on "Power and Weakness", first published in the June-July 2002 issue of Policy Review and now expanded into an entire book, has made its author "the toast of the foreign-policy set" in the words of The New York Times. It has been abundantly cited, admired, discussed, criticized and refuted by journalists and experts on both sides of the Atlantic. Its trace can be read everyday in the debate over the different stances of the United States of America, or its current administration, and Europe, "old" and "new", on the issue of war in the Middle East and perhaps above all on the role of the United Nations and International Law in the current crisis. In my opinion, Kagan also deserves a careful theoretical discussion since its formulations, however brutal they may sound to our ears, rely upon a carefully chosen combination of history, politics, and philosophy. The viewpoint expressed by Kagan is certainly not "the American viewpoint" on the future of transatlantic relations, since there is no such thing as a unified "American" viewpoint even if there are certain powerful systemic constraints. But it is extremely revealing of what many theoreticians of the current direction of American international politics do think and it identifies a problem that will remain on the agenda for some time. I do not accept its premises, but I think that we can learn from it. For these reasons, I want to discuss some aspects of the essay that seem to me especially important, "from a European point of view".

2. "It is time to stop pretending that Europeans and Americans share a common view of the world, or even that they occupy the same world," writes Kagan, who is targeting the kind of "European opinion" on whose emergence and development American liberals place their hopes. Europeans believe they are "moving beyond power into a self-contained world of laws and rules and transnational negotiation and cooperation." But while Europe would have entered "a post-historical paradise of peace and relative prosperity", the realization of Kant's "perpetual peace", the United States "remains mired in history, exercising power in an anarchic Hobbesian world where international rules are unreliable and where true security and the defense and promotion of a liberal order still depend on the possession and use of military might.

3. One may wonder, then, what is the origin of the European rejection of the use of force as a means to solve international conflicts? According to Kagan, it is not because Europeans possess a special character or nature: in past centuries when they dominated the world they never tired of using force to increase or maintain their power, but they have become weaker and simply no longer have the capacity for power politics. Europe and America have "exchanged" their political cultures, as it were: it is now Europe that has adopted the Wilsonian discourse, dreaming of "civilizing the world" by putting an end to wars and doing away with Machtpolitik, the terrible effects of which Europeans have experienced on their own soil. A nice project indeed ... but subject to one proviso: what makes European pacifism and moral consciousness materially possible is American military power itself! "The irony is that this trans-Atlantic disagreement is the fruit of successful trans-Atlantic policies. As Joschka Fischer and other Europeans admit, the United States made the new Europe possible by leading the democracies to victory in World War II and the Cold War, and by providing the solution to the age-old 'German problem.' Even today, Europe's rejection of power politics ultimately depends on America's willingness to use force around the world against those who still do believe in power politics. Europe's Kantian order depends on the United States using power according to the old Hobbesian rules. Most Europeans do not realize that they can project themselves into "post-history" or "post-modern history" only because the U.S. did not follow this path. But as a result "this has put Europeans and Americans on a collision course."

4. I don't believe that I distort the meaning of Robert Kagan's analysis if I say that, in a nutshell, his argument is as follows: the "European" position, expressing something like a religion of law, is at the same time powerless ("Europe? how many divisions?" we might ask, echoing Stalin's famous question), and illegitimate since it disguises a historical regression as moral progress, misrepresenting its real weakness as an imaginary strength. Finally it is self-destructive since it undermines the defensive capacities of the Western democracies, everywhere under attack in the world, which remain its only safety. It is decidedly not America that has "too much power" but is Europe that has too little.

5. Let us now focus on three aspects of Kagan's argument that are not only of political, but also of theoretical interest.

6. First, Kagan undertakes a genetic critique of the "European Ideology" which more or less closely follows classical models, particularly the Marxist approach. In these terms, the European ideology would be a mystified reflection of the material situation of Europe
and of the position which it occupies in a changing historical "relationship of forces". This line of argument picks up theses which have already been outlined by European authors, but gives them a new, more cogent and systematic character. Kagan's analysis turns on his description of the Europeans' "belief" in the advent of the reign of Law and negotiation, and of their illusion that they have passed "beyond history", meaning beyond relations of force and domination, what Marx called "pre-history", even though the material conditions which allow for the emergence of an isolated "paradise" of peaceful relations are themselves constituted by the protection that American arms extend over Europe and the rest of the democratic world. The blindness of European consciousness with regard to its own conditions of existence is typically described as an "idealism" to which is opposed the "materialism" of real history.

2660. It is by returning to the historical origins of "American" and "European" ideas, and to the reversal that has taken place between their respective conceptions of power and law, that Kagan is able to correct the initial symmetry of his description and avoid the risk of suggesting an equivalence between the two points of view. "Europe in the past half-century, he concedes, "has developed a genuinely different perspective on the role of power in international relations, a perspective that springs directly from its unique historical experience since the end of World War II. It is a perspective that Americans do not share and cannot share, inasmuch as the formative historical experiences on their side of the Atlantic have not been the same."[8] But Kagan does not maintain this reversed conception. The two perspectives are not equivalent, since on one side there is misrecognition, and on the other recognition of what constitutes the reality of international relations: confrontations between powers that only a superior power can settle. There is therefore a point of view of the "real world", outside ideology, which allows it to be understood and judged without falling into the trap of an ideological symmetrical. The criterion would be whether or not one is able to confront the dramatic challenges of the present, the threat of terrorism and other challenges to the World order that no ideological astuce can put aside.

2661. Such a characterization however produces a difficulty concerning law. Like many "materialists" before him, Kagan has a tendency to describe the European ideology not only as a naive way of believing in the virtues of the legal form, a "religion of law" as it were, but also to define law itself as "ideology". However, this position cannot be sustained for very long because his aim is not to label US policy as "power politics" -- although he uses the term Machtpolitik, in his eyes this represents the past conception and practice of Europe when it was not afraid of openly displaying its ambitions of world-domination -- but rather to demonstrate American strategic realism, with the rule of law as its final goal (in accordance with the democratic values and progressive ideals common to the West as a whole), and the deployment of power as the means, which impose their own constraints. As a consequence, Kagan philosophically tends towards what we might call a "weak Machiavellianism", which he characterizes by means of the notion of a double standard. Why is it that the US, in critical circumstances, acts "unilaterally"? It is because they have no other choice. History has placed them -- and them alone, since the Europeans have "renounced power" -- in the position where they must confront certain universal dangers. They must act in the jungle according to the law of the jungle while preserving at home and advocating abroad the values of civilization. Kagan acknowledges that there is here something like a moral tension, perhaps even a tragic responsibility: "The problem is that the United States must sometimes play by the rules of a Hobbesian world, even though in doing so it violates European norms. It must refuse to abide by certain international conventions that may constrain its ability to fight effectively in Robert Cooper's jungle. It must support arms control, but not always for itself. It must live by a double standard..."

Few Europeans admit, as Cooper does implicitly, that such American behavior may redound to the greater benefit of the civilized world, that American power, even employed under a double standard, may be the best means of advancing human progress -- and perhaps the only means.[47]

2662. With regret I pass quickly over Kagan's philosophical references here. The antithesis of the "Hobbesian" and the "Kantian" positions (which is today very popular again, with the name of Hobbes sometimes supplemented by that of Carl Schmitt[8]), is a true leitmotiv in his argument: Europeans live in an imaginary "Kantian world", Americans in a real "Hobbesian world". It would be ridiculous to expect from Kagan a scholarly dissertation in the history of philosophy, but it is nevertheless interesting to point to some interesting mistakes here. In order to describe the protective function of the American hyper-power acting for the peace of the world, he does not use the allay of Leviathan (the State or Commonwealth whose power is such that "nothing on earth can be compared with him"), but rather that of Behemoth, the other Biblical monster borrowed from the same passage in Job (40-41) and defined by Hobbes as a power of chaos and destruction: civil wars, revolutions, terrorist threats, in short the "continuation of the state of nature" within society itself. We might see here an (involuntary?) return of the "European" discourse within his own, in the form of a tacit recognition that to seek to impose order in the world by force, through waging war, only perpetuates disorder and the "war as if of every man against every man". There is also an interesting vacillation concerning Kant: it seems that Kagan runs together two different moments in the development of the German philosopher's ideas concerning "peace" by identifying the project of "perpetual peace" with an earlier project of "world-government", the despotoc dangers of which he points out. But this idea of a "federal state" of all civilized nations was only Kant's first thought and one which he abandoned in order to develop the idea of the "cosmopolitan right" as a legal and moral canvass for the construction of peace among independent nations. Historically, the latter resembles the project of the League of Nations created after World War I and did actually play an important role in its conception. Kagan probably is driven in that direction by his desire to present the European ideology of international relations under the rule of the law as a project of extending to the whole world the model of a quasi-federal state or "union" now almost realized in Europe. Jørgen Habermas -- a typical "European" -- in his recent writings on the "post-national constellation" is not very far from this project when he explains, speaking from the opposite side, that the EU could be seen as an
approximation and an intermediary moment in the construction of a Global Juridical Order in which international politics would become a "world domestic policy" (Weltinnenpolitik), and it is indeed possible that Kagan has read Habermas rather than Kant himself. But it is not the mistake as such which is the most interesting point, since it rather indicates a very real problem: between the two successive Kantian "ideas" of World-government and cosmopolitan right (and law), something is missing, namely politics. I take it to be one of the useful suggestions arising from discourses such as Kagan's that the current historical challenge concerns not only institutions such as International Law or the United Nations, however important it may be to acknowledge and redefine its role, but politics: what would be a "global politics", particularly in the case of Europe? Which brings us to another question: what notion of politics do we have and implement? I suggest that what replaces an original notion of politics in Europe is frequently no more than the oscillation between acceptance of the US leadership and verbal anti-Americanism.

3273. This brings us to a second aspect of Kagan's argument. He not only explains that a reversal took place in the balance of forces between Europe and America, which in turn led Americans and Europeans to "trade places" in the realm of ideas and ethical values, he also makes explicit reference to an imperial stance both in the realm of power and in the realm of psychology (a section in the essay is called "The psychology of power and weakness"). The Europe of power was the powerful imperialist Europe which, for five centuries, dominated over all continents and accordingly strongly "believed" in its mission to cast international relations in its own image. In contrast, Kagan describes the current situation in which, as a consequence of "perhaps the most significant reterrnment of global influence in human history", the French, the Germans, and even to a large extent the British have lost the "energy" and the "desire for glory" which underpinned their imperial capacities. This is why Americans now find themselves alone with the burden of enforcing collective security and protecting civilization against the threats of fundamentalism and terrorism. There is in Kagan's text an echo which is certainly deliberate of the celebrated poem by Kipling who, at the time of the seizure of the Philippines by the US in 1899 urged the young American race to "take up the White Man's burden" from the weakening hands of their aging anglo-saxon brethren and to keep the world in order. Instead of Old Europe, it is now the Americans who have become imperialist or more precisely hegemonic. As such, they must in the general interest resist pressures from others to "multilateralize" their power, that is to impose restrictions and conditions upon their use of it, since these would also obstruct their capacity to decide and to act in emergencies.

3274. A question remains: how was this astonishing transformation possible? Between the two extremes of power and weakness, a complex transition must have taken place, and Kagan suggests some of its moments: for example, after World War II, the Europeans found themselves unable to defend their colonial empires at the other end of the world against nationalist insurrections; while during the Cold War, Europe was torn between the two great political systems, as the main theatre of confrontation between the two competing world-systems, and the progressive reduction of its military strength compared with the superpowers, which itself was partly intentional on the part of the American. Above all, he points to the consequences of what seems to have been a decision made by the Europeans at the end of the Cold War as a result of a totally different appreciation of the course of history compared with the Americans. After the collapse of the Soviet camp, the "Europeans", or more precisely the Western Europeans who were progressively integrating their nations into the EU, drew the conclusion that "war was over" and saw this as an opportunity to reduce even further their armaments which were already below the American level. By contrast, the Americans immediately understood (and were indeed later confirmed in this view by September 11) that the enemy had simply changed face, name, and nature. Under successive administrations, including that of Clinton, they started to build equipment and devise strategies for a new type of defensive and preventative intervention.

3275. This gives us the real meaning of the distinction between imperialism in the old (European) sense and hegemony in the new (American) way. We might also say that while the Americans kept pace with the successive phases of Globalization, the Europeans, while believing themselves to counteract its tendency, were in fact losing contact. And here we find a strategic criterion of "power" which is of the greatest interest: namely what Kagan, borrowing from military jargon, calls the capability "to project force". In the past, from the 16th to the early 20th century, European nations led Americans and Europeans to "trade places" in the realm of ideas and ethical values, he also makes explicit reference to an imperial stance both in the realm of power and in the realm of psychology (a section in the essay is called "The psychology of power and weakness"). The Europe of power was the powerful imperialist Europe which, for five centuries, dominated over all continents and accordingly strongly "believed" in its mission to cast international relations in its own image. In contrast, Kagan describes the current situation in which, as a consequence of "perhaps the most significant reterrnment of global influence in human history", the French, the Germans, and even to a large extent the British have lost the "energy" and the "desire for glory" which underpinned their imperial capacities. This is why Americans now find themselves alone with the burden of enforcing collective security and protecting civilization against the threats of fundamentalism and terrorism. There is in Kagan's text an echo which is certainly deliberate of the celebrated poem by Kipling who, at the time of the seizure of the Philippines by the US in 1899 urged the young American race to "take up the White Man's burden" from the weakening hands of their aging anglo-saxon brethren and to keep the world in order. Instead of Old Europe, it is now the Americans who have become imperialist or more precisely hegemonic. As such, they must in the general interest resist pressures from others to "multilateralize" their power, that is to impose restrictions and conditions upon their use of it, since these would also obstruct their capacity to decide and to act in emergencies.

3276. This may be a contestable and simplistic representation of history, but it involves a formidable theoretical challenge. No alternative definition of politics and power itself will have sense if it is not also an alternative or a set of alternatives to this idea of "projection" and its "strategic" model. Or it will have to renounce defining itself as a "world politics", a politics within and for the Era of Globalization. But would a "politics" that was not "global" in that sense still be worth the name "politics" today? In my opinion, the answer is clearly no. It would immediately fall to the accusation of ideological blindness, as a case of conceiving the world as from within a monad in which it is enclosed, or from within a camera obscura in which reality is inverted. This does not mean that a "global" politics suppresses local determinations and responsibilities. On the contrary, I defend the idea that local actors, in particular adversaries or enemies, such as the Palestinians and the Israelis, if they are to survive at all, should resist the pressure to "instrumentalize" their conflict within the framework of Global Confrontations: Terrorism vs Counter-Terrorism, West vs Islam, etc. At the very least, however, alternative political visions will have to define modes of action and communication allowing local actors and collective subjects located somewhere in the world to establish relations and join efforts with all or many of the others, in order to enhance their own "capacity to act". Such visions cannot keep repeating imperatives of freedom and equality and referring to abstract juridical norms for the confrontation of
interests and sovereignties.

3361. Finally, the third important aspect of Kagan's argument concerns his conception of "power" itself. The notion of "power" is anything but stable, even when explained through its opposition with "weakness". Who are the "powerful" or the "strong", who are the "powerless" or the "weak"? How do they become or cease to be such? This is not only a question for political science, economics or strategy, it is a fundamental problem for philosophy.

3362. I find it revealing that Kagan occasionally "translates" his own notion of power as the cornerstone of political realism by the "Bismarckian" expression Machtpolitik. Not only does this nice reminiscence of Morgenthau and Kissinger show that he is somehow trying to have the European Other himself give the key to American superiority, but above all it suggests that he moves from an "objective" historical measure of power to a judgment on the "values" that would be naturally associated with it. By its very nature, the politics of a (great) power should be a power politics. In other words, "power" cannot refrain from making use of itself (and military intervention would be the typical form of this use). Power has no restraint. In a sense each new enemy who stands up and challenges a power to "demonstrate" its superiority does nothing more than express this internal necessity. This is something like the "ontological proof" of power. But Kagan also finds a "psychological" equivalent for it, suggesting that it is inevitable and also "natural" that the greatest power should call for the greatest hatreds, and that it should become rapidly conscious of its existence and the vital threat that they represent, because it anticipates them, whereas other minor powers, even if they are targets themselves, have difficulty in perceiving that they are disliked: they would always like to imagine that they have friends . . . .

3363. My suggestion is that this is not only a political doctrine (should we say an "ideology"?), but also a real metaphysics. It is today all the more important to "deconstruct" this doctrine if we want to think of alternatives, either within the realm of power, as is the case when we pose economic or cultural power -- what Kagan calls the soft-power tools -- to military power because their historic evolution is not exactly the same; or, in a more radical manner, between power and what I should like to call in a generic manner un-power.[15] I don't say "weakness", although it is possible to think of a "politics of weakness" which has its own goals and means, and arms, because I am not thinking of opposing quantities, but of a qualitative difference in power, exploring the idea of a power to "displace", "dis-locate" the existing power (or super-power), rather than over-powering it.[16]

3364. To clarify such an idea we may refer to philosophers who are themselves critics of the "ontological" nucleus of the idea of quantitative power-Macht. It is true in a sense that most of contemporary political philosophy has had exactly this objective, but some authors are especially relevant. I am thinking firstly of Hannah Arendt who, in her great 1971 essay On violence, describes power and violence as antithetical terms the conflict between which determines the capacity to act of an individual or a political community. [17] Either it is "power" which wins over "violence" so that violence is subjected to power, or it is "power" that is subjected to "violence" such that the latter is no longer an instrument, but there is middle term. More precisely violence can be defined as an excess of power trying to compensate for the inherent lack of power, or the incapacity to act politically in the strong sense, that is to organize forces and civilize the world. These are precious indications but they need to be improved with the help of distinctions put forward by Michel Foucault in equally classical texts. [18] They are especially useful for this discussion since he associates a "relational" concept of power with a "strategic" thesis concerning the role of internal and external resistances in the very definition of "power": how they act upon it, how it reacts to them in order to be able to sustain or transform itself. In Foucault's perspective, no power that displays itself on the social stage (a puissance that becomes a pouvoir) can be considered the absolute "property" of an individual or an agent. It is the multilateral effect, always historically fragile, of a constitutive relation with other powers and resistances, including virtual resistances, which it learns or fails to learn how to take into account.

3365. Such considerations may appear speculative, but they have a direct political import on our discussion. They allow us to see the reverse side of Kagan's analysis. His explicit theme is the power difference (or gap) between the American nation and, on one hand, its friends and allies (Europe), on the other hand, its enemies and threats (world terrorism, rogue states). The power gap is already clear for so far as the former are concerned, and it should be demonstrated as quickly and completely as possible with respect to the latter. This supposes, however, that American power belongs to America, as its "private property", and that America is one or is a "subject" (State, nation or people), unequivocally aimed at the manifestation of its "power" and self-identifying with it. Clearly Kagan has (or shows) no doubts about this. He writes: "Can the United States handle the rest of the world without much help from Europe? The answer is that it already does . . . Europe has had little to offer the United States in strategic military terms since the end of the Cold War -- except, of course, that most valuable of strategic assets, a Europe at peace. The United States can manage, therefore, at least in material terms. Nor can one argue that the American people are unwilling to shoulder this global burden, since they have done so for a decade already. After September 11, they seem willing to continue doing so for a long time to come. Americans apparently feel no resentment at not being able to enter a 'postmodern' utopia. There is no evidence most Americans desire to. Partly because they are so powerful, they take pride in their nation's military power and their nation's special role in the world."

3366. Is such a conviction beyond any doubt, however? Various questions might be raised: Who exactly are these "American patriots"? Does the description hold for all the citizens of the United States, and are they likely to be considered in the same sense, equally proprietors of the national power that distinguishes them from the rest of the World? Above all, what are the conditions for this allegedly common identification with
American power to remain undivided? As soon as one raises such questions (with no preestablished answer), other possibilities come into play, which represent alternatives intrinsic to the becoming of power, depending on its changing modalities, the resistances that it will produce inside and outside (not necessarily in the form of "hated"), and its own reactions to them. At least they are thinkable. There is or has been a patriotic attachment to the "democratic values" and the "manifest destiny" of America that forms the reverse and latent condition of a stable world hegemony. But other hypotheses should be weighed as well over time: a process of fascination of important fractions of the American people around a "militarised" power growing more and more influential in international and domestic politics as well, or a critical division of the nation, analogous to the dissent of the Vietnam War Era, albeit with other reasons that also directly depend on the action that peoples and countries worldwide can exert on the US. [20] It is not the least merit of Kagan's straightforward but ambiguous affirmation of the existence of a power without weakness (or an "America" without its internal "Europe", whose counterpart should be a "Europe" without its internal "American") to lead us to reflect on such disturbing possibilities in the middle of one of the great moral crises of modern history.

Notes


3 Kagan, Of Paradise and Power, p.3.


5 A good example is Régis Debray's Tous Azimuts (Fondation des Etudes de Défense Nationale and Editions Odile Jacob, Paris 1989).

6 Kagan, 'Power and Weakness'.

7 Kagan, 'Power and Weakness'.


9 Hobbes, Leviathan, chap. 28.

10 See J. Habermas, The Postnational Constellation, Political Essays, Translated, Edited, and with an introduction by Max Pensky, The MIT Press, 2001. The corresponding texts in Kant are the article Ideen zu einer Weltgeschichte der Menschheit (1784) and the essay Zum Ewigen Frieden (1795) : the French Revolution had taken place in between.

11 It seems that there is a renewed interest for the work of Kipling right now in the US, among debates on the relevance of the notion of empire: see the article "Kipling Knew What the U.S. May Now Learn", The New York Times, January 26, 2002 .

12 The term "American Hegemon" (coming from the title under which Alexander led the Greek expeditions to conquer the barbaric oriental world) was used by Kagan in a previous article ("The benevolent Empire", Foreign Policy, summer 1998), and also by other authors (S. Huntington: "The lonely power", Foreign Affairs, 78/2, March-April 1999).

13 It would be interesting to discuss the extent to which such conceptions of the US's role in today's world politics strictly adhere to the representation of the "sovereign power" as "the capacity to decide of the state of exception" which was proposed by Carl Schmitt in his 1924 Political Theology (Political theology : four chapters on the concept of sovereignty, translated by George Schwab, Cambridge, Mass. : MIT Press, 1985). This interpretation has been advocated by Giorgio Agamben in a recent article: L'Etat d'exception, in Le Monde, December 12, 2002.
It may be an advantage here to read and discuss Kagan from a European point of view, i.e. by using simultaneously different idioms. As is well known (and has been the object of classical studies: I will cite only Raymond Aron's "Macht, Power, Puissance: prose démocratique ou poésie démoniaque?", written in 1964 at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis, reprinted in Études politiques, Gallimard 1972), the notions of power in English, Macht in German, puissance and pouvoir in French are all polysemic and have different ranges of signification. In his essay, Aron would show that the notion of "power politics" (politique de puissance) has constantly oscillated between a descriptive concept of relationships among (Nation) States, and a doctrine in international policy.

The opposition between "hard" and "soft" power has been made popular by Joseph Nye: *The Paradox of American Power*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002, who discusses their relative efficiency in international relations.

I draw inspiration, for the use of such expressions, from Roberto Esposito’s notion of l’impolitico (see his Categorie dell’impolitico, Bologna, Il mulino, 1988. It is certainly the debate about "terrorism" (a catchword which clearly covers all sorts of different historical and moral situations) that has most contributed to re-launching a discussion about the "arms of the weak", thus reviving an important "Hobbesian" theme (see Hobbes, Leviathan, chap. 13: "Nature has made men so equal (…) as that though there be found one man sometimes manifestly stronger in body, or of quicker mind than another, the difference between man and man, is not so considerable, as that one man can thereupon claim to himself any benefit, to which another may not pretend, as well as he. For (…) the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination, or by confederacy with others, that are in the same danger with himself.")


I think that comparisons with the period of the Vietnam War are useful and allow some anticipations, if only to remind us that in the history of the US important fluctuations have taken place as far as the Public Opinion on the questions of "power", "hegemony", and warfare, are concerned. But, leaving aside the complete strategic change between the two periods, it seems that there is also an important difference: the Vietnamese people could claim a moral legitimacy of their own that attracted support everywhere in the world, which is certainly not the case with Al Qaeda nor with Saddam Hussein.

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