

The Ideal and the Real

Alan Sica

Remarks prepared for Judith Blau's session at the 2005 ASA, # 165:

"Thematic Session: From the Others' Perspectives: Pluralism Across Borders (co-sponsored buy Sociologists without Borders)"

I don't know why my friend Judith Blau invited me to join you in this session except perhaps to play the role of "spoiler" or well-intentioned critic, since I am not a member of "Sociologists Without Borders" or SWB. (I won't use the Spanish acronym of SSF that's given preference on the organization's website because I don't know that language, so it seems pretentious and false to me that one would do so, sort of like saying, knowingly, "I just read the latest issue of *KZS*" rather than *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, in order to avoid pronouncing the unmelodious German.) After being asked to appear here today, I carefully read all the documents posted on the SWB website in order to understand what the organization means to accomplish, and how it views itself.

The likelihood that I could really intuit "the Others' Perspectives"—the title of our session—seems small, not only for strong hermeneutic reasons outlined in Gadamer's *Truth and Method* and in many of Paul Ricoeur's works, but because I am not an empathetic virtuoso. My responses to this small hermeneutic exercise come in two forms, one somewhat childish, the other less so.

I must begin with an entirely true story that occurred earlier in the week as I was explaining to an 18-year old male the purpose of my trip to Philly this weekend. He regards himself as a multiculturalist, cosmopolitan, anti-militarist, and pro-humanity sort of person. I told him about Sociologists without Borders and he immediately began to laugh. We were in a car, and I struggled to pay attention to the traffic while also listening to him. "Do you mean like 'doctors without borders'?" he asked. "Yes, and like 'journalists without borders,' too," I responded, with a straight face. He laughed more. Then he said, "That's retarded," which is the opposite of "awesome," for those of you who do not know young people of his age. "I can see you now, Dr. Sica, jumping from a Black Hawk helicopter somewhere in Africa, running up to the nearest starving person and saying 'I'm here to help! Is there anybody you want me to

interview?" Despite my best efforts, I could not persuade him to take my Philadelphia mission seriously because there was no speedy way of explaining why U.S. sociologists ought to torture themselves with issues of cross-national epistemology, methodology, or theory, nor a reasonable explanation of what precisely we have to offer the less fortunate who live abroad.

Another true story comes to mind, which seems not unrelated, at least to me: When I was 11 in 1960 I memorized and recited the Boy Scout Oath: "On my honor I will do my best to do my duty to God and my country and to obey the Scout Law; To help other people at all times; To keep myself physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight." This Oath was connected to the Scout Law, which seemed even more ambitious and therefore forbidding to a prepubescent American male of that time, and perhaps of any time, recalling the fundamental truths of *Huck Finn* [all the former Scouts in attendance can rise now and recite this with me if they feel so compelled]: "A Scout is Trustworthy, Loyal, Helpful, Friendly, Courteous, Kind, Obedient, Cheerful, Thrifty, Brave, Clean, and Reverent." This was solemnly repeated at the beginning of each Scout meeting, three fingers raised in what was called "The Scout Sign." None of my peers at the time realized that we had joined a paramilitary unit, nor that we were imitating the Hitler Youth of 30 years before. But we were acutely aware that none of us could possibly live by this code of ethics, nor would we want to be friends with anybody who tried to do so. It was a prescription for behavior which must have been invented by men of late middle age whose hormonal levels had fallen so low that they could no longer remember what the word "mischief" meant, let alone be capable of performing any. It always felt extremely odd to repeat these ethical maxims each Monday night at the Scout meeting since everybody in the troop realized it had nothing to do with normal life.

In short, the entire apparatus of Boy Scout mind control and ideological expression bore so little connection to everyday life that we rushed through the Scout Law at the beginning of each meeting with the same perfunctory garbling of words that were murmured on Sundays during the tedious liturgical recitations. It may have meant something to the adults who wrote the *Boy Scout Handbook*, but to the Scouts themselves, these sentiments had nothing to do

with anything of importance. Scouting survived as a good time because of rough games, the use of axes and flashlights, the badges, pocketknives, uniforms, rifle shooting, and the occasional chance to go camping in the woods far from home, scaring ourselves with ghost stories amidst the use of moderately vulgar language.

Finally, again from 1960 or 1961, when publicly voiced idealism held more sway in the U.S. than has been the case lately, or at least since Carter left office in 1980, I was invited to a Y.W.C.A. building in a large Southern city for an entire Saturday—which seemed at the time like a mighty sacrifice of precious time—in order to meet with 20 or 30 well-dressed and well-spoken African-Americans (though they were not known as such then), whom I had never seen before and would not see again, schools and communities being rigorously segregated at the time. I was one of few Whites invited to this interracial event—probably because my father was a teacher—and I listened all day to the most earnest discussions about how the races could get along better. This colloquium preceded the riots that began in 1964 and persisted throughout the decade, so the edginess that became common later was absent when we met at the Y. I think of the whole event as more a Eudora Welty short story than a James Baldwin novel. During the final session of talk, during which we sat in a circle in the building's largest room, and just before singing "We Shall Overcome" while holding hands—which was surely the first time I had ever touched a non-white person—I felt that some kind of theoretical and practical summary of the day's testimonials was in order, so I raised my hand and said something like this: "We can all agree on the importance of treating people nicely, but I think that the racial problem in the U.S. will not be solved until there is widespread intermarriage, and white people and Negroes become indistinguishable through their children." This remark, coming from a cherubic 12-year old, did not sit particularly well with the adults present, and I felt that perhaps it was good that the day-long event was nearly over.

Having indulged in the nostalgia mongering so unbecoming and typical of older academics, I will now switch to a more serious mode of discourse presumably more suitable for this setting. I was inspired to reconsider several philosophical chestnuts after reading a good portion of a very new book called

Human Rights: Beyond the Liberal Vision written by Judith Blau and Alberto Moncada (international president of SWB). This volume comes highly recommended by my friends Craig Calhoun and Michael Burawoy, and includes many disturbing facts and observations, e.g., that the richest 200 people on earth have assets that exceed those of the poorest 41% (p. xvi), which means that 200 people "equal" about 2 billion people, an equation that could "make sense" only in a system of global capitalism that is at its base entirely corrosive of the Boy Scout creeds mentioned earlier. Chapter Four provides a handy and accurate assessment of "neo-liberalism" and the larger picture of global capitalism, its sustained suppression of the poor and shameless aggrandizing of the already privileged.

Yet being more theoretically motivated than is probably healthy, I began to wonder into what rhetorical tradition this important book falls. It lists, for instance, the 30 articles that make up the U.N.'s "Universal Human Bill of Rights" from 1948 (pp. 34-40). Article 1 states that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." Article 3 reads: "Everyone has the right to life, liberty, and the security of person." Article 13 holds that "Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country." And Article 25 claims that "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing, medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age, or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control." The book also offers 6 pages listing "Other International Human Rights Instruments" that exist on paper, all having been written since WWII (pp. 44-49). I was glad to read about these documents, since I did not know about them. They are not part of the normal curriculum for graduate study in sociology, at least in those programs I know about.

And there is good reason why they are not part of the knowledge we impart to our apprentice sociologists. It is because they are entirely "normative" in nature (to recall the terminology of that liberal dinosaur, Talcott Parsons), and do not have about them a shred of the "empirically true." That is, as sociologists, we know that every single one of the Articles listed by the U.N. in

1948 not only is entirely irrelevant to the lived experiences of 80% of the world's population, but that taken as a description, they will very likely have no bearing on the future of social, economic, or political life based on what we now know about it--not unlike, of course, the Boy Scout Law. More to the point, they come from a tradition that is ancient among humans, going back at least to Marcus Aurelius in the West, and much further in the East. When Aurelius in 170 BCE wrote "What monstrous pleasures brigands, pathics, parricides and despots enjoy" (6:34), he was preparing the ground for social science by writing descriptively; but when he wrote "Do not because a thing is hard for you yourself to accomplish, imagine that it is humanly impossible: but if a thing is humanly possible and appropriate, consider it also to be within your own reach" (6:19), he offered an apothegm that is encouraging, helpful perhaps, but contrary to normal human experience and the avoidance of low-probability actions.

But it is not to Aurelius or other ancients that most modern writers turn when they wish to investigate the roots of toleration, cosmopolitanism, humanism, or any of the other virtuous attitudes most closely associated with Sociologists without Borders and those hundreds of allied groups that currently crowd the internet. The godfather of this sort of thinking is usually identified as Immanuel Kant, "the greatest of all theorists of international relations," as he was called by the authors of *International Relations Theory*, who were in turn quoted by the author of *Kant and the Theory and Practice of International Right* (Solomon, 2003: note 1). While no sane person would want to deal with Kant's epistemological writings in a setting like ours today, his political writings are much easier to digest and disseminate, and more pertinent. I took this opportunity to reread his short essay, "Perpetual [or Eternal] Peace" (Ted Humphrey translation), published in 1795 when Kant was 71. It might be worthwhile to recall the contents of this seminal (or ovular) document since it represents a skillful and concise blending of the empirical and the normative; and even though Kant does not appear by name in the new book by Blau and Moncada, his influence in this line of thinking remains ubiquitous, even these 200 years later.

Kant's continuing relevance, documented by hundreds of new publications

that appear about his ideas every year, is partly owed to his remarkable prescience, perhaps nowhere more clearly displayed than in this short essay. His first axiom about perpetual peace—which follows his own "satirical" treatment of the notion that anything so delicate as peace could ever be "perpetual" or "eternal," and that worldly politicians have nothing to learn from pedantic philosophers—holds that "No treaty of peace shall be held valid in which there is tacitly reserved matter for a future war." This describes many conflicts in world history, before and since Kant's time, but surely none more obvious than the way the Treaty of Versailles guaranteed WWII. Kant also holds that "Standing armies (*miles perpetuus*) shall in time be totally abolished." He shrewdly observes that "the cost of peace finally becomes more oppressive than that of a short war, and consequently a standing army is itself a cause of offensive war waged in order to relieve the state of this burden." Notice the phrase "short war." If the first Gulf War fits this description perfectly—a war that needed to be fought in order to use up accumulated weaponry and matériel—the ongoing quagmire in Iraq shows how badly this kind of planning can go when stupidly pursued from the outset. Kant would have understood this perfectly.

His fourth axiom holds that "National debts shall not be contracted with a view to the external friction of states." In other words, nations should not sell war bonds or treasury bills in order to prop up a bloated war department. Kant believed that bonds sold for improving domestic economy and infrastructure were fine, but:

a credit system which grows beyond sight and which is yet a safe debt for the present requirements--because all the creditors do not require payment at one time--constitutes a dangerous money power. This ingenious invention of a commercial people [i.e. the British] in this century is dangerous because it is a war treasure which exceeds the treasures of all other states....This facility in making war, together with the inclination to do so on the part of rulers—*an inclination which seems inborn in human nature*—is thus a great hindrance to perpetual peace. Therefore, to forbid this credit system must be a preliminary article of perpetual peace...

The temptation to continue quoting Kant's wise counsel is strong, but time limits require that I desist. A few more highlights must suffice. He denounces the use of hired "assassins" by governments (what are known to us by the congenial term "contractors," those ex-Special Forces men who rent themselves out to Halliburton for \$150K per annum), not because they are not good for war, but because they make future claims for peace insupportable. He is not a Pollyanna, even though he responded with great affection for Rousseau and those other *philosophes* who apotheosized the reasonableness and likely decency of humankind. Sometimes he is almost harsh in his realism: "It follows that a war of extermination, in which the destruction of both parties and of all justice can result, would permit perpetual peace only in the vast burial ground of the human race. Therefore, such a war and the use of all means leading to it must be absolutely forbidden." And the logical corollary: "The state of peace among men living side by side is not the natural state; the natural state is one of war. This does not always mean open hostilities. but at least an unceasing threat of war." Kant obviously regarded these observations as empirically (i.e., historically) based, and not as normative commentary on what might be. His general position in all this is something one might consider when reading the documents that fill the Sociologists Without Borders website. It is in some ways a distinctly pre-Kantian set of ideas.

Kant's famous prospicience, mentioned above, reappears when he actually proposes in 1795 that a "league of nations"—a federation of free states—be created to oversee global peace. He regards this as necessary for the following reason: "When we consider the perverseness of human nature which is nakedly revealed in the uncontrolled relations between nations (this perverseness being veiled in the state of civil law by the constraint exercised by government), we may well be astonished that the word 'law' has not yet been banished from world politics as pedantic, and that no state has yet been bold enough to advocate this point of view."

In a stirring climax to his meditation, Kant calls for the sort of cosmopolitanism which Goethe, we are told, invented in his actions and writings: "Thus the human race can gradually be brought closer and closer to a

constitution establishing world citizenship." And in a remarkable rhetorical performance, Kant concludes with this set of remarks under this final axiom, "The law of world citizenship shall be limited to conditions of universal hospitality":

But to this perfection compare the inhospitable actions of the civilized and especially of the commercial states of our part of the world. The injustice which they show to lands and peoples they visit (which is equivalent to conquering them) is carried by them to terrifying lengths. America, the lands inhabited by the Negro, the Spice Islands, the Cape, etc., were at the time of their discovery considered by these civilized intruders as lands without owners, for they counted the inhabitants as nothing. In east India (Hindustan), under the pretense of establishing economic undertakings, they brought in foreign soldiers and used them to oppress the natives, excited widespread wars among the various states, spread famine, rebellion, perfidy, and the whole litany of evils which afflict mankind....all these outrages profit them nothing, since all these commercial ventures stand on the verge of collapse, and the Sugar Islands, the place of the most refined and cruel slavery, produce no real revenue except indirectly, only serving a not very praiseworthy purpose of furnishing sailors for war fleets and thus for the conduct of war in Europe. This service is rendered to powers which make a great show of their piety and, while they drink injustice like water, they regard themselves as the elect in point of orthodoxy.

If Kant did not have the current U.S. president in mind when he wrote this, it was only because even he had certain limits of imagination.

One might reasonably ask at this point where the utility lies in dragging a patient audience through a slight work by an idealist philosopher. The point for me is this: Kant in a very few pages laid out a "civilizing process" (to borrow and corrupt Norbert Elias's concept) that has not been bettered. One almost wonders if Woodrow Wilson didn't go to school on this very document before concocting the League of Nations in 1920. And yet for all Kant's extraordinary perceptiveness, realism, and hopefulness, we are currently not much closer to his vision of a "world citizenship" than we were one hundred years ago, as a

glance at any major newspaper makes plain. What one finally makes of this predicament is not for me to say, yet I must wonder what ultimate effect organizations like Sociologists without Borders can have in the face of that obdurate "human nature" that so vexed Kant and those scores of later thinkers who have imitated, without surpassing, his precocious work.

Reference

Solomon, Benjamin 2003: Kant's Perpetual Peace: A New Look at this Centuries-Old Quest. *OJPCR: The Online Journal of Peace and Conflict Resolution*, 5:1 (Summer), 106-126.