

Copenhagen: The Ethical Dilemmas of the Democratic Peace Theory in Relation to Copenhagen

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In conjunction with Copenhagen and the moral deliberations of Bohr and Heisenberg, how does an individual in a society determine what is legitimate, what is right and what is appropriate in war? As a means to tackle this question, I will explore how the political makeup of a society influences its citizens' decisions in regards to determining what is just in war. The interest for this analysis developed from Robert Cox's key question: "For whom and for what purpose has democratic peace theory been constructed?"^[1] For the purposes of this paper, how does democratic peace theory impact society's concept of what is legitimate in warfare?

According to Peter Doyle, liberal democratic states have been able to maintain peaceful relations amongst themselves, but are prone to wage war against non-democratic regimes. Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder argue that liberal democratic states have been able to transcend the international system of power politics and anarchy in their relations with other liberal democratic states, and therefore have a direct interest in not warring against each other. Let's consider why this might be the case.

Here, confirmation bias^[2] works because the democratic peace theory is powerfully aligned with people's perception of themselves; those who live in democracies want to believe that they

are peace loving and will only kill and die in war for admirable reasons. With open elections and opposing political parties ready to take over at any point, citizens of liberal democracies need to be convinced of the necessity of violent acts for the purposes of military advantage in order to make them legitimate.^[3] To gain legitimacy the state must somewhat adhere to what society believes to be ethical – what is right and wrong in warfare. Therefore, warring against a democratic state would be a harder sell to the citizens. Given the nature of democracies, it would be difficult for a government or media to demonize a democratic other and to convince their people that the enemy, who uses the same political system in which citizens have a voice, was a threat to its national interests. There would be no dictator to condemn or no illiberal system of government that was oppressing its people and denying human rights.

Therefore, a powerful relationship exists between societal attitudes and legitimacy in a democratic state.

Let us now turn our attention to how exactly democratic peace theory in theoretical terms is used to justify war to society. According to Roxanne Doty in *Imperial Encounters*, democratic peace theory needs "nodal" points around which to fix meaning. In other words, nodal points help to affirm the identity of the 'self' in relation to the 'other'. Two

nodal points are significant in democratic peace theory. The first is the conception of democracy that emphasizes procedural[4] rather than substantive characteristics including elections and constitutions. When substantive characteristics are discussed, the focus is on the freedoms of liberal thought in terms of human rights (e.g. freedom of religion, freedom from arbitrary authority, freedom of opportunity.)

The second nodal point around which democratic peace is anchored is a conception of war as an inter-state exercise. Intra-state warfare does not appear in democratic peace theory. Thus, the democratizing war crusade is viewed as a mission of deliverance and salvation rather than conquest and exploitation.[5]

This issue is related to Copenhagen because the play asks indirectly if atomic power used by a “good” democratic state is more appropriate or moral than if used by a “bad” non-democratic state. Heisenberg recounts with bitterness the refusal of some of the scientists who had worked at Los Alamos and who had produced the atom bomb to shake his hand under the assumption that he had tried to make the same bomb for Hitler. Can the bombs be justified in the hands of American democrats rather than in the hands of German Nazis? Bohr later joined the Los Alamos project, and in the play admits his feelings of guilt over the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. One must ask, what sort of moral judgment are we to make of Bohr’s contribution to the creation of the bomb for the United States? Is it really more accepted and ethical than if Heisenberg had done it for the Germans?

The fact remains that both Bohr and Heisenberg were scientists working or about to work on weapons of mass destruction, placing their creative

scientific energies at the disposal of politicians who thought in terms of mass killings and total victory. The purity, innocence, and wonder of science has transformed itself into a quest for technological power of destruction. In this new age of technological supremacy and indiscriminate killing, democratic peace theory has become one of the means in which citizens separate acceptable killing from non acceptable killing. It is ironic that democracy, the very same political structure that gives citizens such power over the propagation of warfare, can also convince those same citizens that it is more legitimate to use extreme violence and brutality in the name of spreading democracy.

According to Kyle Grayson, the most interesting aspect of democratic peace theory is not how its supporters have attempted to explain the dissemination of the phenomenon, but how it resonates with the general public. Democratic peace theory has been transformed into a set of assertions that are constantly repeated by observers and policy-makers at the first signs of conflict in the international arena and have become engrained in the popular culture of democracy. As Robert Cox points out, hostility toward non-democratic states is more likely because, as discussed earlier, it is easier to mobilize public support for military actions. Non-democratic governments are perceived to be in a state of aggression with their own people, which makes their foreign relations deeply suspect to democratic governments. It is easier to mobilize popular support because the democratic peace theory has been engrained in people’s minds by four separate “truths”:

democracies are inherently peaceful unless unjustly attacked (or threatened) by authoritarian regimes; uses of force by

democracies are justified because they are directed against real threats launched by rogue actors intent on undermining the 'democratic way of life'; democracies by definition cannot go to war with one another (as a result of the first assertion); and therefore, the best way to ensure global stability and peace is to promote the spread of democracy.[6]

The power of these four assertions is amplified by the fact that they are very easy to comprehend and thus resonate with the population at large through repetition and naturalization is to become almost commonsense. The assertions gather support and help to provide a basis for legitimacy for actions that many have otherwise generated opposed. Therefore, the promotion of democratic peace theory should not simply be seen as a fundamental principle influencing the nature of the state government and domestic rule, but as a subjective tool for citizens to differentiate friend from foe and opportunity from threat. In particular, the spread of democracy has been deemed by Western governments as the answer to all global governance issues and has therefore been deeply misused as a justification for the use of force in several instances. According to Grayson, democratic peace theory is easily used to help justify the unjustifiable and legitimate the illegitimate.[7]

Throughout this brief explanation, the answer to the question of 'for whom and for what purpose' the democratic peace theory is designed should now be evident, but not entirely shocking. Democratic peace theory and its associated discourse are for the people, as it creates the binaries necessary for the war-making practices of democracies as a

means of legitimizing war efforts to citizens. As portrayed in Copenhagen, Heisenberg and Bohr continually express their doubts as to whether scientists should cooperate with the state in developing weapons of war. They discuss the moral deliberations of developing a nuclear weapons that will be used against noncombatants, as every citizen should question his or her role in legitimizing war. By simply accepting the four assertions of democracies in a binary and opposing relationship with non democracies and not critically analyzing our confirmation biases, we violate our own moral standards to defeat an immoral enemy. Our just cause becomes no more than imposed rhetoric.

Sources

Doty, Roxanne Lynn, *Imperial Encounters*, University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

Grayson, Kyle. "Democratic Peace Theory as Practice: (Re) Reading the Significance of Liberal Representations of War and Peace." YCISS Working Paper Series, March 2003.

Mansfield and Synder, *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go to War*, The MIT Press, 2005.

Schmitter, Phillipe C. and T.L. Karl.. "What democracy is... and is not," *The Global Resurgence of Democracy*, John Hopkins University Press, 1996.

Endnotes

[1] Kyle Grayson, "Democratic Peace Theory as Practice: (Re) Reading the Significance of Liberal Representations of War and Peace," YCISS Working Paper Series, March 2003.

[2] Confirmation bias is an analytical tool used when we selectively notice or focus upon evidence which tends to support the things we already believe or want to be true while ignoring that evidence which would serve to falsify those beliefs or ideas.

[3] Mansfield and Synder, *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go to War*, (The MIT Press, 2005), 6.

[4] According to Schmitter and Levitsky, procedural democracy essentially refers to the competition of parties in an electoral system, described as the minimal definition of democracy that concentrates on procedural terms defined as voters choosing, in

free and fair elections contested by competing candidates who fill public offices that are governed by constitutional law.

Phillipe C. Schmitter and T.L Karl, "What democracy is... and is not," *The Global Resurgence of Democracy*, John Hopkins University Press, 1996.

[5] Roxanne Lynn Doty, *Imperial Encounters*, (University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

[6] Grayson, "Democratic Peace Theory as Practice," 10.

[7] Ibid.

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[5] Roxanne Lynn Doty, *Imperial Encounters*, (University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

[6] Grayson, "Democratic Peace Theory as Practice," 10.

[7] Ibid.