

Current Concerns

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Common good or reason of state?

Thoughts on peace in the global age

by Professor Dr Dr h. c. mult. Hans Köchler*



Hans Köchler
(picture hanskoechler.com)

I will begin my remarks with a caveat: Whenever the common good, in the sense of the ‘noble goals of humanity,’ is invoked in the pursuit of realpolitik – the so often invoked *raison d’état* – , caution is always called for. History has taught us this since the time of *Alexander the Great*.

Covering up power politics under the guise of the “common good”

For the purpose of our analysis, I will refer to two recent examples: Speeches given by two presidents of the United States – father and son – three and two decades ago, respectively. During the Gulf War in 1991, President *Bush senior* proclaimed with great pathos a “new world order”, in which different states and peoples would come together in the common cause of permanently realizing humanity’s all-encompassing quest for peace, security and freedom. (*State of the Union Message*, January 29, 1991) A decade later, President *Bush junior* spoke of the world’s fight – civilization’s fight – for progress, pluralism, tolerance and freedom. (*Address to the Nation*, September 20, 2001)

Both proclamations – by father and son – placed the armed action that followed these speeches, which they announced, in the idealistic and universalistic context of the common good of humanity. The sobering historical truth, however, is that for three decades (since the first speech in 1991), the world has witnessed and become the victim of a struggle for global dominance, for which entire regions and their peoples have been subjected to war; one need only

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look to Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, or Yemen. The “New World Order,” proclaimed with eschatological pathos, ultimately resulted in a ‘war of the worlds,’ the end of which is still not in sight – not even after the events of August 31 of this year and the apparent renunciation of the policy of “nation-building” by a hegemon who failed in Afghanistan. The conclusion to be drawn from this (to date) thirty-year war is that the common good always serves as pretext when power politics is in need of a cover.

Communal action is the essence of our species

In order to clarify the situation, philosophical reflection on the fundamentals of politics is required, i. e., the elaboration of the “deep politics” of the state. The Aristotelian characterization of the human as a ζῷον πολιτικόν [*zōon politikón*] denotes that communal action constitutes the essence of our species. The goal of every *polis* – in whatever form it may be organized – is to ensure survival and to increase the *life opportunities* of each member of the polis through the social division of labor. This implies, *ex definitione*, an orientation towards the *wellbeing of all*. This is precisely the goal of the *res publica* (the republic as the “common cause”): Individuals rise above their isolation, opting not only to follow their own *particular interests*, but also to strive for their goals within

an organizational framework that serves the cause of the people (*res publica* / republic). One can also draw an analogy here with the step described by Rousseau from the *volonté particulière* to the *volonté générale*, the latter of which is not to be seen as a uniform common will, but rather as the will of each individual directed towards the community of citizens.

The sole goal and legitimation of political action is the common good

It goes without saying that the “natural” organizational form of such “republicanism” is democracy – in the sense of the direct participation of all in community affairs. (Democracy by its very nature is rule *by* the people [direct], not rule *over* the people [representative]). Office bearers in a democratically constituted republic solemnly undertake to serve the interests of their community – and not merely their own particular interests. This undertaking is the essence of any oath of office. The goal and legitimation of political action is solely the common good in the most prosaic sense: that all citizens in the particular state can thrive and prosper.

... bound to justice and human rights

However, it is equally true that the means to achieve this goal are not arbitrary. Political action, even and especially when it articulates “national interests” (i. e., the

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* Introductory statement “Mut zur Ethik” – Annual Conference: “The bonum commune in relations between people, nations and states: Solving problems and conflicts with dignity – with one another rather than against one another” 3–5 September 2021 in Sirmach (TG). (Translated from German)

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good of the state as a whole), is bound not only to the particular constitution and domestic legal situation, but also to the general principles of *justice* and *human rights*. To a certain extent, these are the *jus cogens* [binding rules] for any action by the state. If the common good of the population of a state is to be realized by *any* means – 'whatever the cost' – even beyond the rules of law and morality, then it degenerates into mere *raison d'état*, the only maxim of which is the self-assertion of the existing political structure. Such a strategy brings to mind *Machiavelli's* reflections on the methods of politics needed to 'mantenere lo stato' (maintain the state).¹

As is the case with all principles relating to social action, the principle of the common good, when it is *reduced* to the means of its realization, i. e., when it is viewed in *isolation* and *as an absolute*, turns into its opposite: namely, into pure *statism*, which establishes the self-preservation of the state – detached from the real life of the people the state represents and who alone justify its existence – as an *end in itself*. Following this logic, howev-

er, the use of nuclear weapons to ensure the survival of the state would then possibly also be legally justified, as the *International Court of Justice* stated in a not uncontroversial part of its *Advisory Opinion on the Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons*.²

Etatism in this abstract sense – as the *raison d'état* of the particular rulers (the ruling elite), determined by their striving to maintain and increase power – also seems to be the driving force behind the succession of wars for supremacy in the imaginary "new world order" that has now been with us for 30 years – the period to which I previously referred. What is important at present – in the precarious situation of a never-ending war, the futility and hopelessness of which (taking the form of the "global war on terror") has once again been brought home to us in recent days – is a return to the principle of the common good as the substantive, not merely formal, basis of existence and legitimation of the state.

Return to the common good as the basis of the state

More so than in previous eras, the law of *interdependence* applies. In the global age, every community is connected

to all others at all times. For most countries, *autarky* – "splendid isolation" – is only possible by forgoing some essential achievements of technical civilization, i. e., ultimately by reducing the quality of life. Thus, if autarky is no longer a realistic option, the polis in question must take note that the welfare of its citizens is inextricably linked to the welfare of the citizens of all other polities. This is particularly evident in the case of the environment, as the central issue of our collective survival. The common good can and must therefore no longer be defined *exclusively* in terms of one's own state, to the exclusion of all others. Otherwise, as indicated, it becomes the mere (abstract) *raison d'état* as the basis of power politics, i. e., the assertion of one state's national interests vis-à-vis all other states.

Prerequisites for a genuine policy of peace

Rather, the common good must also be defined inclusively – with reference to the entire community of states. So there are two categorical levels here: (1) common good at the level of individuals (citizens)

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The bonum commune in relations between people, nations and states: Solving problems and conflicts with dignity – with one another rather than against one another**September Talks of "Mut zur Ethik" from 3 to 5 September 2021 in Switzerland**

From 3–5 September 2021 the September Talks of the working group "Mut zur Ethik" were held; this year, due to the pandemic, in a hybrid format. During three days fundamental questions on current events were discussed in dialogue on an equal footing. The talks this time were focused on the theme: "The bonum commune in relations between peoples, nations and states: Solving problems and conflicts with dignity – with one another rather than against one another". The speakers from various European and non-European countries as well as the numerous participants, including the participants who gathered in several German and Austrian cities and who were connected to the conference, contributed to the success of the discussions with their highly qualified statements.

What is meant by bonum commune in interpersonal relations? The bonum commune, the common good, "is the natural meaning and purpose of people living together, and this meaning, this purpose, consists in the free development of the person in and through community. [...] At the centre of all efforts for the common good is the individual person. He or she must never be a means to the end of a superior collective. The free development of the individual person must not degenerate into

radical individualism, where the individual, detached from human relations only pursues its own interests. Self-interest and the common good are not opposites." ("Bonum commune — Ethics in Politics and Society", Congress "Mut zur Ethik" 1998)

The view on this year's topic went in two directions: The extremely willingness to help at the beginning of the Corona pandemic or the willingness to help after the flood catastrophe in Germany are just two obvious examples of the fact that the social nature of human beings is not just a theory, but lived life all over the world. Precisely because it corresponds to the social nature of man to be attached to their fellow human beings, to develop compassion and a sense of community, it is natural for the overwhelming majority of people to contribute to the common good.

But there is also another direction: The unscrupulous striving for power, which does not shy away from the use of brutal violence — even in the form of war. The results: Billions of people continue to live in abject poverty, children still have to starve, and an end to the wars in the world is not yet in sight. The list is much longer.

20 years of NATO war against Afghanistan have shown us in a microcosm to what kind of war crimes and

crimes against humanity those are capable who lack orientation towards the bonum commune or where people are lied into wars through an abusive reinterpretation of the common good as *raison d'état*.

In this issue we start with the introductory statement by Professor *Hans Köchler*, other contributions will follow.

Other contributors were: Dr *Srdan Aleksic* from Serbia, *Eva Aras* from Germany, Professor Dr *Peter Bachmaier* from Austria, Dr *Matin Baraki* from Germany (originally from Afghanistan), *Ralph Bosshard* from Switzerland, Professor *Stanislas Bucyalimwe* from Belgium (originally from the Democratic Republic of Congo), Professor Dr *Marc Chesney* from Switzerland, *Nicole Duprat* from France, Bishop em. Dr *Elmar Fischer* from Austria, *Edward Horgan* from Ireland, *Zoltan Kiszelly* from Hungary, *Karin Leukefeld* from Germany, *Sergey Lapshinov* from Russia, Professor Dr *Velimir Nedeljkovic* from Serbia, *Florian Pfaff* from Germany, Dr *Muruchi Poma* from Germany (originally from Bolivia), *Jochen Scholz* from Germany, Professor *Emmanuel Seemanpillai* from Sri Lanka, Dr h.c. *Hans von Sponeck* from Germany, Professor Dr *Heinrich Wohlmeyer* from Austria.

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of the state (*intrastate*) and (2) common good at the level of states as forms of collective organization or subjects of international law (*interstate*). Only when a state “learns” to articulate its national interests – the epitome of the common good at the domestic (*intrastate*) level – jointly with all other states, can it develop a *credible* and *consistent* policy of peace. Just as the state only comes into being when individuals are able and willing to position their *particular* interests within the framework of the *general* interest – i. e., when they do not see themselves as acting in isolation, but as members of a community, as citizens –, so an interstate (ultimately global) order of peace can only exist when each state rises above its “sovereign isolation” and acts as an equal member of the global community of states. This is the essence of the “sovereign equality of states” proclaimed by the UN as a central principle.

In conclusion: As soon as there is more than *one* state and the states enter into a relationship with each other (in our technical civilization, autarky à la *Robinson* is merely an abstract idea), the common good of each individual (sovereign) state is always also a function of the global common good. This means that if peace is to be maintained, national interests can only be asserted on the basis of *reciprocity*. Anything else would cause the world to revert to the “Souveränitätsanarchie” [anarchy among sovereign states] of earlier centuries. Under the conditions of the global coexistence of states and peoples, the term “common good” contradicts *itself if it refers to only one* polity.

Even if for the most powerful actors insistence on the *raison d'état* in the sense of absolutism has remained a temptation to this day – for which the United Nations Charter is considerably at fault –, the perpetuation of old fashioned power politics cannot simply be accepted. In the *global age*, such an approach signals “perpetu-

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al confrontation” instead of the Kantian “perpetual peace” – with all the devastating consequences for the peoples at the fault lines of the global power struggle, as we have observed in the already mentioned decades since the end of the Cold War. The “negotiation” of a new, this time probably multi-polar, balance of power will only proceed without prolonged war if all those responsible – irrespective of their states’ political, economic or military place in the global competition – take to heart the solemn pledge of the Preamble to the UN Charter, poetically expressed by the founders of the organization in the name of “We the Peoples of the United Nations”: “to live together in peace with one another as good neighbours.”

The fact that the UN Charter, born out of the catastrophe of World War II, effectively exempts the *most powerful* states from the application of the obligations resulting from this proclamation is no cause for optimism. The guardians of peace – in the sense of the global common good as intended by the Charter – would finally have to be convinced to submit themselves

to the rules that apply to everyone else.³ Only when this happens – i. e., when those states renounce their privileges enshrined in the UN Charter – will world peace not remain a mere illusion, and only then will the common good be more than the *raison d'état* of the most powerful. •

¹ The term “*raison d'état*” was not coined until after *Machiavelli*, by *Giovanni Botero Benese*, in his work remarkably dedicated to the Prince-Archbishop of Salzburg, *Wolf Dietrich – Della Ragion di Stato: Libri Dieci Con Tre Libri delle Cause della Grandezza, e Magnificenza delle Città*. Venice: I Gioliti, 1589.

² International Court of Justice, *Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons. Advisory Opinion* of July 8, 1996, Section 97 (“legality or illegality of the use of nuclear weapons by a State in an extreme case of self-defence, in which its very survival would be at stake”). It is important to note that the Court’s position on this issue would have remained undecided (7:7) had it not been for the President’s casting vote.

³ Because of the decision-making rules of Article 27 of the UN Charter, the prohibition of the use of force in relations between states cannot be enforced against the five permanent members, upon whom the application of coercive measures substantially depends. If one of these countries commits an act of aggression, it can use its veto to prevent the Security Council from intervening.

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