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HENRY KISSINGER'S DIPLOMACY

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“One must choose one’s friends and enemies according to the circumstances of each particular occasion.”
Thucydides

“Whoever conducts negotiations in Moscow has to pay a price....”

Henry Kissinger’s response to (Israel’s Foreign Minister) Abba Eban’s allegation that he negotiated with Moscow behind Israel’s back on his way to a meeting with Golda Meir.

“Metternich.”

(Israel’s Prime Minister) Golda Meir’s response to Kissinger.

It is impossible to read Henry Kissinger’s *Diplomacy* without experiencing a certain measure of cognitive dissonance. In an age when the fashion is to speak of international interdependence, the global march of democracy, collective security and the obsolescence of the nation-state, *Diplomacy* seems decidedly old-fashioned. Its pages are replete with approving references to Geopolitics, *Realpolitik*, the Balance of Power, National Interest, *Raison d’état*, Spheres of Interest and the like – concepts that many international observers in North America would like to see permanently consigned to the trash-bin of history. Even scholars sympathetic to Kissinger’s views usually prefer to sugar-coat their own pronouncements in order not to offend the sensitive ears of today’s public. The only concept from the above *repertoire* that is still frequently used is the concept of the “balance of power.” As for the rest, a “clash of national interests,” for instance, becomes a “difficulty in security cooperation” and “power politics,” a “security dilemma.” Kissinger would have none of that linguistic delousing. Truth might not be pretty, “[b]ut life being what it is,” he writes, no one can “remain pristine.” (548)

I.

The central theme of *Diplomacy* is what Kissinger perceives to be the fundamental division between those who see foreign policy as merely an extension of domestic politics and those who draw a clear dividing line between the two. Very broadly speaking, the exponents of the first school are referred to as idealists, whereas the followers of the second are the so-called *realists*. Kissinger’s book is the latest installment in the on-going “war” between these two main schools of thought among American academics and foreign policy makers. Kissinger, like other *realists*, is adamant that there is a natural and sharp division between domestic and international relations. The former is necessarily rooted in some system of values, while the latter, out of necessity, abjures value judgments in favor of calculations of national interest, arising from the balance of power and the politics of *Realpolitik*.

The well-known basic premise of the *Realpolitik* approach to international relations is that there is no such thing as an identity of interests between nations. Conflicts among nations are natural and arise out of different national interests, not out of misunderstandings or misperceptions. Long-term collective security and cooperation in such a world cannot be taken for granted; if interests are divisible, so must be security. In a world where the fundamental survival of a state is presumed to be at stake, considerations of morality must take a back seat to expediency.

To prove the verities of *Realpolitik*, Kissinger takes us on a grand historical tour: from the beginning of the Thirty Years' War to the Peace of Westphalia; from the Napoleonic Wars to the Congress of Vienna; from World War I to Versailles; from World War II to the end of Cold War and beyond.... Kissinger marshals all of his formidable skills as a historian to demonstrate that only those who have stuck to a cold-blooded calculation of national interest, carefully matching goals to capabilities, have managed to succeed, while others who have attempted to base their foreign policies on the basis of some moral universalism and collective security were destined to fail. Inevitably, Diplomacy's heroes are such practitioners of *Realpolitik* as Cardinal Richelieu, von Metternich, Castlereagh, Disraeli, Bismarck, Theodore Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, de Gaulle and Richard Nixon.

The main villain of Diplomacy is the "missionary vigor" of Wilsonian *idealism*, "derived from American's faith in the essentially peaceful nature of man and the underlying harmony of the world" (221-222). According to this creed, since only democracy allows for these tendencies to assert themselves, advancing its cause is equivalent to advancing the cause of peace. Logically, then, spreading democracy abroad must be *the* goal of U.S. foreign policy. Kissinger, however, is convinced that it America's mission should not be "to help the inevitable along" (705). For Kissinger, as for other theorists and practitioners of *Realpolitik*, there is no necessary connection between a democratic form of governance at home and peaceable policies abroad. Democracies, he claims, including those of the United States and Western Europe, have a number of incompatible national interests (547). The failure of Americans to grasp this fact, and their congenital inability to accept the very notion of *raison d'état*, continuously runs the risk of U.S. strategic (and psychological) overextension or isolationism. Either outcome would be disastrous for the world and for the United States. According to Kissinger, the U.S. must stay globally engaged, but it has to make sure that there are no gaps between its principles and its power (658).

II.

Even though the American reader is the intended target of Kissinger's latest work, Diplomacy is a peculiarly "un-American" book. This is not because it criticizes what it perceives to be the misguided idealism of U.S. foreign policy, for there are many distinguished Americans who have done the same. Kissinger's argument is perhaps the most eloquent, but it is still merely one among many. Instead, Diplomacy stands out because – despite its bold conceptualization and nuanced argument – it does not pretend to provide a comprehensive model of international relations. In choosing an heroic approach to history, Kissinger implicitly disdains the American penchant for positivistic theory-building. Although comprehensive in its scope and full of useful propositions, his Diplomacy is not in the end a "how to" guide for foreign policy makers. Kissinger would be temperamentally incapable of producing such a work. In his Harvard thesis, he wrote: "Life is suffering, birth involves death, transitoriness is the fate of existence." In Diplomacy, Kissinger argues that there are few neat solutions in international politics; mostly, there are imperfect outcomes, and some are worse than others (467). Even many so-called historical turning points can only be recognized in retrospect (671). At best, there may be some rules, but there are no laws.

Thus, the world according to Kissinger is a harsh and unforgiving place – a place in which ideals tend to be destroyed rather than fulfilled. It is a world that is instinctively alien to American readers, but quite comprehensible to a European mind. This should come as no surprise. As the *National Review* put it brutally – but essentially correctly – almost a quarter-century ago, Kissinger is “a European by heritage and cultural choice, a cosmopolitan by circumstance, and an American by deliberate...calculation.” Twenty-four years later, despite his personal and professional success in the United States, Kissinger remains an outsider, intellectually and temperamentally. There is a brief but poignant moment in *Diplomacy* where Kissinger, when quoting Raymond Aron, calls him “the great French philosopher and political scientist” (595). The remark is revealing and invites some reflection. There is an interesting parallel between his life and that of Aron. During Aron’s lifetime, few French thought of him as great. He was better known abroad than in France. Aron was a liberal in a nation that tends towards extremes, and because he was Jewish, he was not considered “really” French. For his part, Kissinger, remarkably unconcerned as he is with destinies – manifest or otherwise – is an immigrant and a Jew to boot. As of this writing, Kissinger is more likely to be reviled than revered.

CONCLUSION

Whereas optimism still reigns in official circles in Washington and among academics, *Diplomacy*’s outlook for the future is explicitly pessimistic (818). One American critic wrote ironically that, “Kissinger... calls on American leaders to back confidently into the twenty-first century with eyes fixed on the nineteenth.” Why ironic though? Perhaps pessimism is taboo in a land where, each day, the world comes into existence *ex nihilo*, from a *tabula rasa*, and imbued with the *telos* of manifest destiny. But why should Europeans, and particularly East Europeans, share this optimism? For them, Kissinger has hit the nail on the head. In Europe, history – though not quite caught in eternal recurrence – still looks suspiciously familiar. Eastern Europe is mired in internal political turmoil (reassuringly called the transition to democracy by Western academics), economic collapse, rising nationalism and ethnic cleansing. West Europeans, stealing a page from their own past, once again have proved unable to put an end to blood-letting on European soil. In Western Europe itself, German reunification and rising populism and nationalism in France, together with generational change among the elites of both countries, threaten the special Franco-German relationship – the corner-stone of the European Union. And then, of course, there is Russia....

In *Diplomacy*, Kissinger warns us that there are no sign-posts to the new world order. The only advice he can offer is to beware and to be weary of new beginnings. This is advice worth listening to.