

## Critical Notice / Étude critique

### *Philippe Constantineau and the Classical Doctrine of Foreign policy*<sup>1</sup>

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In *La Doctrine Classique de la Politique Étrangère: La Cité et les autres.*, Constantineau attempts to show that, contrary to the opinion of contemporary scholars, the Greeks did not see "war" as a natural and inevitable part of human nature (11), and in conjunction with this he wants to show that one can reconstruct from the works of the "classical theorists" (Thucydides, Xenophon, Isocrates, Plato, and Aristotle) a doctrine of "foreign policy." This doctrine, Constantineau argues, constitutes the counterpart to the classical classification of the political regimes (monarchy, oligarchy, democracy), and it still remains the primary framework of reference for political systems (12). Although the classical theorists in question have little to say about the relations between states, they do have a great deal to say about the relations between the individuals or forces within a state, and according to Constantineau, these relations are analogous to the relations between states or peoples.

To this end, Constantineau attempts to reconstruct the "foreign policy" of Thucydides, Xenophon, Isocrates, Plato and Aristotle respectively. Constantineau informs us in the introduction that the unity of the chapters will only appear in the conclusion, when he proposes a "global reconstruction" of the classical doctrine of foreign policy (17). The different doctrines when fused together, he believes, will appear as contributions to a unified and coherent doctrine of international foreign policy (17). This admonition is well taken, for the chapters do indeed have little in common. Moreover, for a work which purports to be based on the classical classification of regimes (14), Constantineau hardly elaborates on the topic. Indeed, it is only given a three-page analysis in Plato and hardly more in Aristotle — the two authors explicitly named in this context (13–14). Moreover, for a book which at the outset was to be a monograph on Plato's doctrine of foreign policy (12–13), Constantineau dedicates almost fifty percent of the book to Thucydides and

only ten percent to Plato. And much of what he states with respect to Plato has little to do with "foreign policy" strictly speaking. However, this critique should not detract from the overall value of the book. Constantineau makes a number of perceptive remarks with respect to each of the five theorists, and his conclusion albeit speculative is both interesting and brilliant. In this review article, I would like to give a brief overview of the salient points in each chapter and then make some general comments with respect to the conclusion.

The largest portion of the book is dedicated to the great Thucydides and, in many respects, to his famous remark that since "human nature" never changes, his work is "a possession for all time" (1.22). But, Constantineau argues, if human nature never changes, neither does the relation between states. Meanwhile, Constantineau is radically opposed to other contemporary interpretations of Thucydides and, in particular, to that of the neo-realists for whom Thucydides (Hobbes's hero) was a proponent of "realism." Since the contemporary debate on realism actually dominates the theory of international relations (26), Constantineau weighs into the debate. He convincingly shows that for Thucydides, history is not condemned to the tragic repetition that would result from the unvarying application of the law of the strongest. Indeed, this is where political science comes into the picture. Political wisdom can teach us to predict a tragic outcome and thus avoid it (contrary to what the neo-realists argue); but alas there is no guarantee of this, as Constantineau equally notes, for given certain situations (not to mention the notions of honor and self-interest) the masses will not always react to reason (111–12). But the fact remains that Thucydides is not a fatalist and, in this respect, he is the forerunner of his fourth century successors according to Constantineau.

Meanwhile, the fact that Thucydides gives voice to not only to the Athenians and the Lacedaemonians but also to the other peoples who were dragged into the Peloponnesian war informs us of the different perspectives from which his contemporaries could see the war and, more generally, of the relation between states. Thucydides gives a lucid explanation of how and why empires originate and how war occurs. It is the acceptance by the weakest, according to Thucydides, of subjection by the stronger in return for protection (42) that explains how and why empires originate and how war occurs. In conjunction with this, Constantineau discerns a certain number of foreign policies and corresponding notions of justice advocated and practised by the participants of the Peloponnesian war: hegemonic by the Corinthians, egalitarian by the Corcyraeans, imperialistic by the Athenians (71–88). These policies show the problematic relation between justice and empire which will re-emerge in the second part entitled "empire, hegemony and confederation."

When discussing the so-called "realism" of the Athenians, the distinctions which Constantineau sees between hegemony and imperialism are not always evident. Moreover, Constantineau does not clearly distinguish between

natural justice and conventional justice. Indeed, he appears to see "natural justice" or "realism" as the only position advocated by the Athenians. But if such is the case, how does one account for the fact that when addressing the Lacedaemonians, the Athenians consider their allies as equals (1.77.3), whereas when addressing the Melians, they consider them as unequals (5.86–112). In reality, there is little to indicate that Thucydides thinks that the Athenian's statements to the Melians can be elevated into a general principle of "foreign policy" as Constantineau appears to suggest. The Melian dialogue may be seen as a counterpoint to Diodotus' response to Cleon in the debate over Mytilene in 427 (discussed by Constantineau at 64–65) and an indication of how continuing years of war have corrupted the Athenians: they are now no different from the Persians they had previously faced at Marathon.

Xenophon, for his part, associates "good government" with empire. According to Constantineau, Xenophon is advocating a monarchical type of imperialism (and thus foreign policy). However, its aim is not to conquer and enslave but to provide peace and prosperity for all: Greeks and non-Greeks (134). Xenophon is convinced that only an enlightened monarch could achieve such a result. The peoples would willingly submit to his authority in return for peace and prosperity (116). While much of the material in this chapter has little to do with "foreign policy," we should note that Xenophon does clearly state in the discussion between Socrates and Aristippe (123) that what is valid between individuals and the state is also valid for the relation between states (*Memorabilia* 2.1.10).

Isocrates advocates an enlightened democratic Athens (termed a "just hegemony") leading a coalition of Greek states with variable powers against a Persian empire which, once conquered, would provide an inexhaustible supply of material wealth. The fact that the barbarians, according to Isocrates, were already used to enslavement would only facilitate his task; indeed, as Constantineau points out, the fact that they appeared to Isocrates and others to be incapable of governing themselves as free men only reinforced the Greeks' conviction that they were slaves by nature (207). Although in Isocrates's view all the Greek states would be "free" to direct their own affairs, as Constantineau notes, this vision of a "just hegemony" leaves unanswered the question whether the Greek states could maintain their liberty without imposing their own sort of regime (to wit: democratic) on the peoples they conquered.

Plato is considerably more difficult to assess. Constantineau examines a certain number of texts from the *Republic*, the *Timaeus*, the *Critias* and the *Laws*. In the context of the *Republic*, the military class is introduced in the context of a state that is not satisfied with the basic necessities of life. To increase its wealth, Plato explicitly states that a state needs an army both to invade the territory of others and to defend its own territory against similar aggressions (*Republic* 3.373d–374a). Thus Plato does not envision the

abolition of war. This could only occur if every state were reformed on his principles. Constantineau does not sufficiently develop this point. Plato's prescription that the city must be neither too large nor too small (423b-c) and neither too wealthy nor too poor explains why Plato advocates, as Constantineau perceptively notes, a foreign policy which will exploit such weaknesses in the social structures of its potential adversaries (160-62) and at the same time give no good reason to his potential adversaries to want to invade the ideal city: the ideal state is not interested in gold and silver. In sum, foreign policy, as Constantineau notes, is clearly tied to survival. However, it is unclear what kind of foreign policy this implies.

In his analysis of *Republic* 5.469b-471c, Constantineau clearly shows that Plato wished the other Greek cities to have a foreign policy similar to his own, for Greeks should not be enslaved — whence the importance of alliances against the barbarians. Indeed, at *Republic* 5.470c Plato states that the barbarians are “natural enemies” (*polemiou phusei*) and that this quarrel is what merits the name “war” (*polemon*). Constantineau does not mention this important passage. More important, it is unclear what kind of foreign policy Plato is advocating in this passage. Nor is it necessarily consistent with the foreign policy suggested in *Republic* 3 and 4. Meanwhile, the introduction of the “philosopher king” (5.473c-d) implies for Constantineau that the theory of the ideal city and the foreign policy connected with it is meant to be universalized (168). Ironically, Constantineau does not discuss the implications of this for internal and external affairs. Finally, Constantineau's analysis of the foreign policy which follows from Plato's description of the “imperfect societies” (169-74) is, with the exception the timocratic society (by nature a bellicose state), frankly perplexing and of little relevance. This in itself is problematic, for Constantineau makes the rather bold claim that his own thesis is based on the classical classification of regimes (14).

Constantineau's analysis of the foreign policy connected with the famous Atlantis story (*Timaeus/Critias*) is, to say the least, superficial. It is frankly perplexing why Constantineau would only dedicate three short pages (172-74) to what could very well be the central piece in any analysis of Plato's foreign policy. As Plato explicitly states at the outset of the *Timaeus*: this is about the ideal city of the *Republic* in action, conducting war and negotiations (19c-e). At one point, Constantineau points out that after their victory, the Athenians did not impose a hegemony on their allies or on the Atlanteans (173) but gave them their liberty. How such a small state could impose a hegemony is not considered! Nor does Constantineau discuss the type of regime we are dealing with in the context of Ancient Athens and Atlantis, let alone their respective coalitions.

In the *Laws*, as Constantineau correctly notes, Plato is opposed to the position that war or more precisely victory in war with foreign states is the ultimate end (179). Plato insists on the fact that internal harmony of the state

is more important and that this can only be achieved through legislation, that is, through the rule of law. This in turn, Plato is quick to point out, will be the best defense against foreign aggression (685b-c). Whether Plato believes that what is valid between citizens is also valid between states, as Constantineau claims, is unclear. Certainly the texts that Constantineau cites (180-81) are inconclusive if not irrelevant. In his analysis of the genesis of the state in *Laws* 3, Plato certainly shows us as Thucydides before him that the lessons of history are an important contribution to political science. But the only clear example of foreign policy, that is, Plato's discussion of the Dorian League, is not discussed. In fact the eighteen pages that Constantineau dedicates to Plato's foreign policy in the *Laws* have little if anything to do with the subject. (So again, why not have focused on the Atlantis story?) It is worth noting that the location and structure of Magnesia show to what degree Plato is almost paranoid of foreign influence, Greek or barbarian. The fact that god, law, and nature are somewhat synonymous in the *Laws* may also have certain implications for Constantineau's position.

Constantineau tackles Aristotle (193-202) from the perspective of his attitude to “wealth.” Contrary to Plato, Aristotle saw wealth as a “natural necessity”; without it, leisure and thus contemplation would be impossible. Since the end of life is happiness, foreign policy must somehow enhance this. To create favorable conditions, a state must facilitate commercial relations with foreign powers (194). However, for Aristotle the cause of war is not such commercial relations but rather immoderation and intemperance within a community. This is interesting, but again, there is little, strictly speaking, about foreign policy.

On the other hand, Constantineau gives a stimulating account in the final chapter on the concepts of slavery and of a “natural enemy,” and these appear as an indispensable background to the forces motivating Classical foreign policy. Aristotle's own argument for slavery, as Constantineau notes, is that since the polis is more naturally advanced than a monarchy, people in a monarchy are like the inferior part of the human soul, incapable of excellence, and thus deserving of enslavement (210-11). Although Aristotle's concept of slavery by nature cannot be justified, Constantineau interestingly notes that the classical concept of “natural enemy” certainly has a number of parallels in contemporary politics (e.g., in the notion of a structural antagonism between states: international law is always interpreted from the perspective of the state's own interest, 213). Indeed, both notions are premised on the typically Hellenic idea that there exists such a thing as “human nature.” And as Constantineau correctly notes, it is irreconcilable views of human nature that explain the origin of contemporary conflicts including the Second World War (not to mention the infamous “cold war”): such and such a concept of human nature serves to promote such and such an institution.

The conclusion in which Constantineau attempts to reconstruct the

classical doctrine of "foreign policy" is the most interesting and original part of this book. The accent in the conclusion is put on the classification of regimes. However, as I noted above, we are not actually prepared for this. Constantineau argues that since interior and exterior politics are closely connected and since the "natural inequality" of forces between states is recognized or presupposed by all (224), one can conceive of three archetypical forms of exterior relations governing the balance of power between states: first, monarchy-empire, that is, a world in which a unique state exerts its power over the other peoples and consequently in which these other states do not have an independent "foreign policy"; second, oligarchy-hegemony, that is, a world in which a small number of states at the head of military alliances exert their influence to assure a certain stability or security in the world; and third, democracy-anarchy, that is, a world in which even regional hegemonic powers cannot dictate the foreign policy of less powerful states. Constantineau believes that the current world order corresponds to a form intermediary between the two ideal types of world empire and perfect anarchy, that is, to an oligarchy albeit mixed with structural elements reminiscent of both the empire and democracy (229) and in which the "rule of law" predominates.

Since the book is presented as a series of monographs, there is a certain lack of unity and coherence. However, the concluding analysis itself is well worth the read.

# Note

- 1 Philippe Constantineau, *La Doctrine Classique de la Politique Étrangère: La Cité et les autres*. Paris/Montréal: L'Harmattan, 1998, 240 p. References in the article are to this book.