

# Critical Dialogue

## **Democratic Peace: A Political Biography.**

By Piki Ish-Shalom. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013.

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— Hans Joas, *Humboldt University, Berlin and University of Chicago*

In 1988, the American political scientist Jack S. Levy famously declared the “absence of war between democracies” to “come as close as anything we have to an empirical law in international relations” (Levy, “Domestic Politics and War,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18 [no. 4, 1988]: 653–73, here p. 662). While this statement could be taken as a mere indication of the perennial dream of social scientists to become like natural scientists and to support their claim that their disciplines can be similarly cumulative, methodologically uncontroversial, and practically relevant, this particular declaration was much more than that. It was an attempt to contribute to the translation of a relatively recent development in the social sciences into a powerful instrument for strategic and political decision-making processes.

Relatively recent? While the proponents of this theory asserted that it had its origin in the thinking of Immanuel Kant and, therefore, in the reasoning of one of the greatest figures in the history of ideas, they more or less ignored the fact that the theory had not drawn much attention during the larger parts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. One of the characteristics of the political science debate on “democratic peace” is a certain tendency toward historical decontextualization. Not only Kant but also crucial categories like “war” and “democracy” (or Kant’s “republic”) remained, perhaps due to the pressures of operationalization for quantitative studies, historically rather unreflected.

The book by the Israeli political scientist Piki Ish-Shalom is presented as a “political biography” of the idea of democratic peace, and such a “biography” of an influential social-scientific theory is certainly most welcome. The book at hand is not as comprehensive as one might have wished it to be. The lively debate about Kant’s ideas in Germany around 1800 (collected in Anita and Walter Dietze, eds., *Ewiger Friede? Dokumente einer deutschen Diskussion um 1800*, 1989) and later European

contributions, like those by Pierre Hassner or Ernst Otto Czempel, are ignored. The interpretation is totally tied to the self-perception of American political science. It mostly starts in 1983 with R. J. Rummel’s and, above all, Michael Doyle’s seminal essays—strangely ignoring Doyle’s later work. A brief reconstruction of the American pre-Doyle debate is added to the conventional picture.

While this emphasis on the selectivity of this political biography seems necessary, it is not intended as a critique. The author has set himself a different goal. His main interest clearly is to use the “biography” of “democratic peace” as exemplary for what happens to theories in general when they migrate outside academia. He is deeply interested in the empirical study of the complex processes involved and in the normative questions arising in this connection. The chapters lie on rather different levels, therefore. Some are mostly narrative, others densely theoretical. Methodologically, the whole book is based on a critical study of academic literature, semiacademic journals, partisan publications, “publicist writings and op-eds in major newspapers, presidential addresses, and policy papers” (p. 4).

On the more concrete level, I found *Democratic Peace* highly informative. While many readers will be familiar with the facts in the chapters about American foreign policy and its intellectual rationalization and legitimation, the chapters on Israel and particularly on Benjamin Netanyahu’s and Natan Sharansky’s pronouncements contain much additional material. Regarding the United States, Ish-Shalom sees the constellation after the collapse of communism in Europe and the end of the Cold War as particularly relevant: “The rare combination of a new, relatively peaceful world order, and a compelling theory that fits the collective identity and self-image of the sole emanating superpower, resulted in a public convention that democracies do not fight each other, which was accepted by policy-makers and foreign-policy pundits” (p. 70). The author describes in detail the important role that Bill Clinton’s presidential campaign against President George H. W. Bush played in this regard, and how Clinton succeeded in attracting some, not all, neoconservative intellectuals because of their conviction that the democratic peace theory supports their view of the moral justification of American national interests.

In a later chapter, he shows how President George W. Bush exaggerated the claim even of the most ardent defenders of the “democratic peace” theory when he asserted in 2006 that “we know from history that free nations are peaceful nations” (p. 140).

The chapter on the ways in which the Israeli Right mobilized the “rhetorical capital” of the democratic peace thesis deftly distinguishes between the academic and the political level. Academically, Netanyahu’s back-and-forth between the different versions of the democratic peace thesis—namely, the one that emphasizes structural and the competing one that underlines normative explanations—could be seen as inconsistent, but according to the author, it is better to consider this apparent vacillation between theoretical alternatives “part of a well-crafted public relations effort” (p. 98). If the Palestinians have to democratize first, this is an excellent excuse for postponing the peace process. When Hamas won the elections in Gaza in 2006, Netanyahu—according to Ish-Shalom—abruptly changed his rhetorical strategy, gave up referring to the democratic peace thesis and substituted it with a new idea, namely, the idea that capitalism by itself leads to peace. It becomes clear that the author of this book is very much driven by the misuse of the democratic peace thesis in Israel and in connection with the U.S. war on Iraq.

On the more abstract and general level, the author has the ambition to show how power shapes truth without falling into the traps of a Foucauldian approach or following fashionable versions of constructionism. For Ish-Shalom, actors have to be specified and the pluralism of modern societies has to be taken into account. Moreover, for him, there is not only one causal direction at work here but a much more complex interplay among academic discourse, public debate, and strategic use of theory. For his purposes, he adduces insights from the hermeneutical tradition and from Antonio Gramsci’s analyses of the formations of hegemony. The details of his complex model have to be left aside here. Normatively, he follows Robert Goodin’s distinction between “blame” and “task” responsibility. This means that although theoreticians cannot be called responsible for every use or misuse of their theories, they cannot declare themselves uninterested in them either; they must take an active interest in addressing why their theories have been vulnerable in a certain respect. The book ends with advice for the producers of theories about how to comply with such a norm.

Although this book certainly is not a complete political biography of the rise (and decline) of democratic peace, it is a considerable achievement. By adding shorter analyses of the “capitalist peace” and the “soft power” approaches, the more general approach is also put to the test. It would perhaps have been useful to add some reflections on whether the results offered here with regard to political science are expected to be true for the other social sciences

and for the humanities as well. More importantly, a chapter addressing the question of what remains from this whole debate after the decline of the democratic peace thesis would have been extremely helpful. Many of the objections and skeptical evaluations of the thesis are presented in the text and often in footnotes, but they are nowhere brought together in a systematic fashion. Such a chapter would have had to deal with the paradoxical consequences that have always characterized democratization at gunpoint and military aggression in the name of peace.

### Response to Hans Joas’s review of *Democratic Peace: A Political Biography*

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— Piki Ish-Shalom

Notwithstanding globalization, our social world is fragmented by borders and fences, and in recent years, it has become even more delineated. Borders, walls, and fences are built between states, between cities, and within cities, and gated communities are a spreading norm. These boundaries are not limited to social, political, and economic entities. They exist in other realms as well, such as academia. Such boundaries are evident in the present critical dialogue, as they play a fascinating and complementary role in the two reciprocated critiques. In a nutshell, I criticized Joas and Knöbl for turning a blind eye to disciplinary boundaries, and Joas criticized me for yielding to them too easily. These two lines of obverse criticism reaffirm the importance of cross-disciplinary critical dialogue.

Joas levels two main criticisms at my book. The first is that the political biography is not comprehensive enough in that I focus mainly on “the self-perception of American political science,” to the extent of neglecting the European, mainly German, discussions of the democratic peace. The second is that I am preoccupied with political science and fail to explore the significance of my discussions “for the other social sciences and for the humanities as well.” Now compare these two criticisms with my own criticism of Joas and Knöbl, that “they venture into disciplines in which they are less versed,” which, I argue, weakens the forcefulness and accuracy of their arguments. Put differently, Joas accuses me of being paralyzed by disciplinary boundaries and of limiting myself to a narrow segment of academia. For my part, I say that Joas and Knöbl are blinded by the promise of a “postdisciplinary history of disciplines,” and fall victim to the resilience of disciplinary divisions.

There is much truth in Joas’s criticism. I do restrict myself to political science and in particular American political science (though I do analyze it using European perspectives, such as hermeneutics and Gramscian critical

theory). By limiting myself to what I see as a workable and reasonable research program, I may well have secured an accuracy and coherency for my arguments, but at a price. I may have bought excessively into disciplinary boundaries and in so doing failed to consider the relevance of my arguments to the broader fields of social sciences and humanities. Perhaps I have also helped to reify academia as a loose assembly of gated communities.

I think, however, that it is possible for us to reach past disciplinary boundaries, though not as Joas and Knöbl suggest, by ignoring the real differences between disciplines. I think the way forward is to invite real critical dialogue like this one here, within and between different disciplines. This dialogue would be one that acknowledges boundaries while recognizing and making the most of what academics do share. Such a dialogue can carry the knowledge and insights produced locally within our communities across the boundaries into other disciplines, securing coherency and accuracy as well as broad relevancy and applicability.

**War in Social Thought: Hobbes to the Present.** By Hans Joas and Wolfgang Knöbl. Translated by Alex Skinner. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013. 325p. \$35.00.  
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— Piki Ish-Shalom, *The Hebrew University of Jerusalem*

Hans Joas and Wolfgang Knöbl have given us an intellectual treasure trove. The authors skillfully lead us on an edifying journey through historical eras and encounters with towering theoretical minds. At the heart of this scholarly journey lies a purpose: to reveal what they call the “suppression of war,” namely, that “throughout the period examined here—from Hobbes to Habermas as it were—wars are often constitutive of theory construction, as the informative background to ideas, yet they do not appear in theories themselves at all or only to a small extent” (p. viii). This suppression is a result of liberal assumptions that cause theorists to view war as a kind of relic that is doomed to disappear. Theorists, the authors maintain, almost wish war away, but do so without grounds, blinded by liberal ideology that they interpret broadly, as “a family of ‘liberalisms’” (p. 3). This family includes all those progressive worldviews that believe in enlightenment and progress, including, for example, Marxism.

Joas and Knöbl argue that liberal blind spots and the suppression of war in actual theories have influenced and failed social theorizing throughout its history. To support their argument, they do not make do with the obvious towering candidates, such as Auguste Comte, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Georg Simmel, Raymond Aron, Charles Tilly, and Anthony Giddens; they delve into the less remembered sociological alleyways and corners to examine

secondary figures. They thus meticulously construct, in almost Skinnerian fashion, the intellectual context in which social thought is conceived and formed and the argumentative, scholarly back-and-forth among and between interlocutors: the intellectual discussions that sharpened and refined social theory, yet left it almost blind to war. It is this contextualization of the great minds within their intellectual cohorts that gives the book its depth and contributes to the strength and solidity of Joas and Knöbl’s argument.

The authors also expand the horizon of analysis in another way. They look at it not only “vertically,” spanning the great minds and the secondary echelon of thinkers, but also “horizontally,” ranging from sociology to its related disciplines, such as philosophy, political science, economics, history, law, and international relations. The book thus offers an in-depth examination of the ideas of Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, James Mill, John Stuart Mill, Emanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Vladimir Lenin, Friedrich Meinecke, Carl Schmitt, and many more thinkers who are not necessarily sociologists. This horizontal expansion in range carries the same advantages as the vertical expansion. However, it also has some disadvantages, such as reducing the book’s structural tightness and weakening the forcefulness of the authors’ argument as they venture into disciplines in which they are less versed. Later, I will expand on this weakness.

The book progressively establishes the context of the theoretical discussions and the arguments on the suppression of war in the course of six chapters, each devoted to another period. The journey begins with the seventeenth century and Hobbes, who in many respects gave rise to modernity and paved the way for the systematic study of society, in other words, sociology and its related disciplines. Next examined is the development of social thought throughout periods of peace and war and up to our day, contextualized temporally, nationally, theoretically, and sometimes also thematically. In their short conclusion, Joas and Knöbl outline an alternative theoretical approach to the study of peace and war. Their proposal, which is adopted from the work of German international relations scholar Dieter Senghaas and his “civilizational hexagon,” is 1) to go beyond the monothematic and monocausal nature of many of the theories analyzed in the book, 2) to avoid being fooled by overoptimism regarding the prospects of peace, and 3) to strive for terminological precision (pp. 252–56). Admittedly, this proposal is sketchy and requires further elaboration and even justification. It is not entirely clear, for example, how the suppression of war necessarily arises out of its monothematic and monocausal nature, and it is thus unclear how Senghaas’s “civilizational hexagon” can in any way ameliorate this problem.

A second problem results from some terminological imprecision. Thus, the scope of *War in Social Thought* is indeterminate. Is it a book about theorizing war and peace in sociology or about theorizing war and peace within a broadly understood view of social thought? The book hovers indecisively between the two options. For example, the introduction starts out by depicting the development of sociology, only to make a startling shift on page 6 where it begins addressing the broader concept of social thought. And although the authors' aim is indeed to analyze the broader category of social thought, the various chapters' titles mostly refer to sociology. Even the blurbs on the cover are divided between praise for the authors' engagement with sociology and praise for their engagement with social theory and/or social thought. And as Joas and Knöbl go through the process of defining social thought, it becomes not only broader than sociology but also fuzzier: "Social theory and—with an even broader meaning—social thought are thus essentially the analysis of social action, social order, and social change" (p. 6). This very broad categorization could have been useful if the intention was only to apply it inclusively. However, the authors also use it to exclude expertise and specialization, such as military sociology and conflict studies, which naturally cannot suppress war. They justify their suppression of these specializations, explaining that although "we are concerned with the abstract problems of action, order, and change, we are not interested in every social scientific analysis ever published on the topic of war" (p. 6). They use this declaration to rationalize their filtering of writers and disciplines that do not reflect the suppression of war. They thus succeed in portraying a coherent postdisciplinary history, presenting a scholarship entirely affected by war suppression. But this coherency comes with a heavy price tag, that of precision.

In a sense, however, this problem is unavoidable because of the authors' wish for broad analysis. Their mission is impossible. Inasmuch as they wish to present a "post-disciplinary history of disciplines" (p. 6), this task cannot be accomplished within 256 pages of text, even one as rich as *War in Social Thought*. The result is especially evident in their references to international relations. They do no justice to the history of IR and its present-day theoretical richness. It may be unfair to expect them to succeed in this vast task of postdisciplinary history, which is really beyond human grasp. The problem is that they are the ones who set it. More modesty would certainly have helped to validate their argument about the existence of war suppression.

The authors' decision to even attempt the task is awkward in another sense. IR is the discipline of the study of war and peace (as well as a myriad of other global/transnational issues), and so by its own vocation cannot suppress war. At least in the case of IR's history, liberal assumptions committed the discipline to theorize

war, its origins, and the ways in which to attain peace (a commitment that in the early days led to accusations of idealism). So even attempting to theorize IR as suffering from war suppression creates problems for the validity of Joas and Knöbl's findings and argument. By focusing on sociology, their argument might have been a little less encompassing and sweeping but it surely would have been more precise.

Joas and Knöbl's problematic analysis of IR is not their fault alone, however. It is also a forceful indictment of the division of academia into disciplines and subdisciplines. Anyone who has attended the annual International Studies Association conventions long enough will probably encounter a sober discussion of the failure of IR to communicate its theoretical innovations to other disciplines, that somehow IR always (superficially) borrows ideas from other disciplines yet never lends its own original ideas to them. This excellent book, with all its forcefulness and intellectual brilliancy, provides strong evidence supporting this soberness, at least in part. IR ideas rarely cross disciplinary borders in their full richness. Even the deliberate effort by Joas and Knöbl to engage IR in this way has not proved entirely satisfactory. This might be symptomatic of the proliferation and insurmountable explosion of knowledge and social theorizing, but it may also be evidence of the strictness of disciplinary borders. Be that as it may, even two contemporary polymaths and this excellent book cannot fully succeed in the incredibly vast task of producing a "post-disciplinary history of disciplines."

### Response to Piki Ish-Shalom's review of *War in Social Thought: Hobbes to the Present*

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— Hans Joas

Authors will always be grateful when their book is called "excellent" and "an intellectual treasure trove." But experienced authors also know that quite frequently such praise is accompanied by serious criticisms. In the present case, the critique is not directed at any one of the specific interpretations by me or my coauthor of thinkers between Hobbes and the present. It is instead directed at 1) a lack of clarity regarding the question of how our concluding proposal, based on Dieter Senghaas's "civilizational hexagon," can in any way "ameliorate" the suppression of war; 2) a fuzziness in the precise identification of the disciplines that our "postdisciplinary history" is dealing with; and 3) a certain neglect of the literature from "international Relations," a subdiscipline of political science.

The first point seems to be based on a misunderstanding. Our aim in the concluding section was to offer an alternative not to the suppression of war but to all

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monocausal and monothematic explanations because they all can be easily misused for propagandistic purposes. Such an intention should be rather familiar to the reviewer since he is the author of an important book on the misuse of one such one-sided attempt, namely, the theory of “democratic peace.”

The second point marks a real problem. Sociology is a discipline that is not much older than a hundred years. Restricting our argument to the institutionalized discipline would have been artificial and narrow-minded. But as soon as one includes the pre- or nondisciplinary discourse of “social thought,” the boundaries indeed get fuzzy. Fortunately, the reviewer himself calls the problem “unavoidable.” I think it is not fair to say that “the book hovers indecisively” between different options here, but it is obvious that our attempt to explain our rationale in the introductory chapter has not been completely successful.

In concentrating exclusively on the liberal tradition, the reviewer tends to neglect the fact that we also included thinkers who recognized the potentially attractive character of violence, from Hegel to Georges Bataille.

Thirdly, it is true that our book is not a history of international relations. We would never deny that this subdiscipline has produced a vast amount of important empirical and theoretical work. But instead of blaming us for not offering a comprehensive overview of this field in our book, would it not have been better to say a few words about how the picture we have painted would change if we had said more about this area of specialization?

Perhaps the best conclusion one can draw from this exchange is that social theorists and IR experts should engage much more in a process in which both sides seriously learn from each other.