

A European federation of states is the only form of integration which has the chance to preserve freedom and survive shifting power relations between sovereign nations.

Over 200 years ago, the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, predicted the rise of a great political body in Europe, akin to the present European Union. Using Kant's 'philosophical triangle' [Simon Glendinning](#) argues that Europe's present position as a region of connected, but sovereign states does not go far enough, but that a single unified Europe would be a 'graveyard of freedom'. Instead, a federation of states provides the best future for Europe.



In two texts written in the [1780s](#) and [90s](#) Immanuel Kant predicts the emergence 'in our continent' of 'a great political body of the future without precedent in the past.' Reading these texts today it is impossible not to be impressed by the uncanny extent to which Kant's descriptions map on to the developing project of European union. But, as Europe struggles to find a stable form of integration, Kant's contemporary relevance does not stop at an impressive prediction. In their Introduction to a recent [book](#) on the European project, Kalypso Nicolaidis and Justine Lacroix explore what they call 'a philosophical triangle' articulating three currently central conceptions of Europe as a political formation. What is so striking about the three conceptions is that they are *all* discussed by Kant. The three concern Europe as:

- (i) a region of interconnected but autonomous nation states;
- (ii) a federation of such states; and
- (iii) a single united state.

Kant gives reasons to support all three but, as I will briefly explain, he finally comes down on the side of only one.

(i) Europe as a region of interconnected but autonomous nation states

Kant's question is whether there can be long-term progress in the political organization of human societies. His focus is on what he regards as the most advanced form of society in his time: 'peoples who have grouped themselves into nation states.' And his basic claim is that impressive constitutional improvements seen within such nation states are of limited value as long as the destruction of nations through wars remains a likely fate. The consolidation of political progress *within* a nation thus also calls for a 'general agreement *between* the nations.' This agreement would have as its aim 'to preserve and secure the freedom of each state in itself.' Kant calls for the formation of just such a 'general agreement'. So it is all about the freedom of nation states. Or is it?



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(iii) a single united state

Let me jump for a moment to the third form of European integration. In this case, integration is not merely a formal agreement between autonomous nation states but a project for their effective abolition as centres of power capable of waging war. Some of Kant's remarks suggest he envisages this as the outcome of a world-wide movement of increasingly advanced forms of constitutional government. For example, he says the 'final step' of political development would be the formation of a world-wide government capable of securing peace through the operations of what he calls 'a united power' and 'the decisions of a united will.' It appears then that what Kant is really proposing is the formation of an international state; a new supra-national governing body arising first in the form of a united European state and thence in the 'final step' in a united world state.

Further reason to suppose this is Kant's view is given by his insistence that the 'general agreement' he calls for at an international level parallels the original 'social contract' at a national level. At a national level individuals in a condition of nature agree to submit to coercive laws that they themselves produce – thus achieving civic peace. In a parallel way, nations existing in a condition of nature one to another must submit themselves to the coercive laws of a supra-national authority that they themselves create. And it is certainly true that Kant thought the idea of an international state in Europe – and in the final step a 'world state' – is the only *rationally ideal* solution:

There is only one rational way in which states coexisting with other states can emerge from the lawless condition of pure warfare. Just like individual men, they must renounce their savage and lawless freedom, adapt themselves to public coercive laws, and thus form an international state, which would necessarily grow until it embraced all the peoples of the earth.

However, and despite this admission, Kant never loses sight of the fact that in an international context one is always faced with relations between *singular sovereign wills*, the wills of nations, and that the voluntary formation of 'a great political body' *by nations* can only bring into being a relatively stable 'united will', not the formation of a new singular 'general will.' Indeed, to the 'only rational' proposal Kant immediately objects that '*this is not the will of the nations,*' and he rejects it on this ground. What he calls 'the positive idea of a world republic' must be replaced by a 'negative substitute'. This is the idea of 'an enduring and gradually expanding federation *likely* to prevent war...although there will always be a risk of it bursting forth anew'.

Kant's objection to an international state does not end there. He also thinks that an international state is likely to be too big to administer in a non-despotic way: 'For the laws progressively lose their impact as the government increases its range, and a soulless despotism, after crushing the germs of goodness, will finally lapse into anarchy.' An international state would, he says, 'sap all man's energies,' and a 'universal despotism ends in the graveyard of freedom.'

(ii) a federal union of nation states

For Kant, then, everything moves between two limit graveyards of freedom: the 'lawless state of savagery' of the state of nature, and the condition of 'universal despotism in an international state.' Both are to be avoided, and so Kant calls instead for something he also sees coming in Europe: a form of federation *likely* to prevent war:

This federation does not aim to acquire any power like that of a state, but merely to preserve and secure the freedom of each state in itself, along with that of the other confederated states.

Kant affirms this as the only form of integration which has the chance both to preserve freedom and to survive the shifting power relations between sovereign states. If we want to avoid the two graveyards of freedom for Europe today we should follow him.

This article is based on Simon Glendinning's talk at the LSE event, Philosophy and European Union held at the LSE on 19 June. [More details of the event](#) and a [podcast](#) are also available.

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