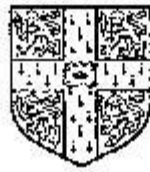


UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
FACULTY OF HISTORY



POLITICAL THOUGHT AND INTELLECTUAL HISTORY  
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Old Combination Room, Trinity College

Kant on Rebellion  
and the Mere Idea of Popular Rule

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## The Author

Christopher Meckstroth is a Lecturer on the History of Political Thought in the Faculty of History at the University of Cambridge. He received his A.B. in Social Studies from Harvard University and his Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Chicago. Before coming to Cambridge he was a Lecturer in Social Studies at Harvard. His research combines interests in democratic theory with the history of 19th century political thought in Germany and France, particularly with the rise of German idealism from Kant to Hegel and later reactions to this in political philosophy, history, and the social sciences. His work has appeared in *Constellations* and *The American Political Science Review*; his book manuscript, currently under review, is titled “The Struggle for Democracy: Legitimacy, History, and the Politics of Change.”

## The Paper

This paper weighs in on long-running and still unresolved debates over how to square Kant’s insistence that states’ legitimacy depends on their role in securing the freedom of their citizens, on the one hand, with his famous rejection of a right of resistance, on the other. One popular interpretation denies that Kant really meant to rule out all revolutions; another (influential in contemporary political theory) takes him to hold that any regime to which a people *would* or *could* rationally consent is therefore binding on them, whether or not it can also be said actually to represent their general will. The paper shows instead how Kant’s view depends on his strict adherence to Hobbes’ claim that a people, as distinguished from a multitude, exists only in and through a political constitution, as modified by Rousseau’s insistence that even a sovereign may rule only through general laws respecting citizens’ equal liberty. However, Kant also emphasizes that the original contract is a “mere *idea* of [practical] reason,” which nevertheless obliges even sovereigns in fact established by force. This foregrounds the gap between the idea of a united sovereign people and its material presence, further radicalizing Hobbes’ skeptical rejection of the priority of society to political authority, and making it both possible and necessary to treat every existing regime *as though* it represents the people’s general will. Kant, then, denies that introducing liberal or Rousseauian principles allows one to avoid Hobbesian conclusions about

the state's monopoly on coercive judgment. But he also points to an unbridgeable gap in every state between the counterfactual notion of a consensually-established republic and a constitutional reality that always falls short of that ideal. This leads him to endorse a constitution of ongoing reform, introducing a historical and future-oriented dimension into the content of natural law. But it also points to the difficulty of accounting for legitimate historical change in a social-contract framework, a problem that contributed to the appeal of various historicisms and the decline of the social-contract tradition in Germany over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> c.