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FOR A SENSITIVE EXPERIENCE OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS. BENEVOLENCE, ACCORDING TO FRÉDÉRIC RAMEL

Interview with Frédéric Ramel (Sciences Po, Centre de recherches internationales (CERI), CNRS, Paris, France), by Miriam Périer

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In his book, *La bienveillance dans les relations internationales. Un essai politique*, published this winter by the CNRS Editions, **Frédéric Ramel** sets out to examine and analyse international relations through the lens of benevolence. Ramel, a professor of political science and researcher at the CERI explores this notion, which cynical commentators consider naive, looking at its origins and meaning. Through this, he provides an alternative, more sensitive perspective on our contemporary era as well as on past events. He answers our questions below.

You write, “Whether as a disposition or as behaviour, benevolence emphasises relationships based on a kind of solidarity that is particular in that it expresses human sociability, whether horizontal through conviviality between equals, or vertical through protection between non-equals, at a particular moment when faced with a particular tragic situation, which may be lasting or not.” So who demonstrates this benevolence in the context of international relations? Diplomats? Senior civil servants in international organisations? Members of a globalised civil society?

Frédéric Ramel: Benevolence is not the prerogative of a select few. But before presenting the agents who are governed by it, it is important to

make a distinction between benevolence as a disposition and benevolence as an action. All human beings can recognise behaviour based on benevolence—not causing harm to others (negative benevolence), helping those who are vulnerable, and/or taking reasonable steps to promote the good (positive benevolence). As spectators, we can all evaluate and admire the actions of someone like Denis Mukwege, the gynaecologist who “repairs” women who are victims of rape in conflicts in Africa, or someone like Leymah Gbowee, the Christian leader who promotes non-violence and advocates for the inclusion of women in the peace process in Liberia. However, taking action (whether planned or spontaneous) is not automatic. What I explore in this book is the existence of this disposition associated with an attention to oneself, to others, and to the natural milieu in which we live, as well as the manifestation of benevolence in its negative and positive forms. The first actors who come to mind are diplomats, who take into account this disposition or even trigger it in immediate response to suffering endured by their counterparts and fellow citizens following terrorist attacks or natural disasters.

I also refer to the resonance these diplomats may experience in their practises by cultivating calm and silence (which might be described as an acoustic reading of their profession¹ which help to make diplomatic relationships more solid (whether in negotiation situations or during commemorations). But I also broaden this exploration of benevolence to other actors: intergovernmental organisations who contribute to cultivating social multilateralism in a spirit of solidarity (improving the living conditions for individuals, such as the International Labour Organisation for example); paradiplomacy cultivated by cities based on cooperation in terms of urban planning, transport, waste management, and which encourages improvements in well-being at the local level²; and NGOs who promote assistance for the most vulnerable. Ordinary individuals are another important link in this chain and can also mobilise actions of benevolence to assist migrants (hospitality), change their forms of consumerism through new ways of managing shared spaces, or the preference for local producers (sobriety).

This exploration encourages us to recognise benevolence not as a substitute for power – still less as the foundation of international

politics, that would be totally utopian – but as a kind of glue, a cement that primarily serves to encourage civility. As Pierre Hassner rightly emphasised in *La revanche des passions*, “if we do not, to varying degrees, have some sense of fraternity, a world that is based exclusively on interests or one exclusively based on identities cannot function.” This recognition forces us to concretise our understanding of the conditions that help to liberate benevolence. In this respect, representatives of the English school such as Andrew Linklater, following on from Norbert Elias, have already contributed to the demonstration of the links between self-restraint and interdependence effects.³

You mentioned negative benevolence, could you say a little more about that?

Frédéric Ramel: Negative benevolence consists in not hurting others. It goes hand in hand with the principle of doing no harm. In international law, the basis of the due diligence principle, which promotes the idea of refraining from harm even before an action is undertaken, is based on the principle of benevolence itself because it activates concentrated attention to otherness. This negative benevolence must not be confused with the darker sides of benevolence which I explore in my book. Indeed, I do not rule out potential negative side effects of an action conducted in the name of benevolence, of which the effects may come into tension with the basis of its very nature (what Ricoeur called the “affective substance” of respect⁴). Such negative effects may include instrumentalization for the purposes of reputation, the arrogance that may come from bestowing on beneficiaries assistance they are unable to return, or a lack of recognition from third party actors who may refuse that assistance categorically (which would mean necessarily accepting their refusal).

Let us look at the case of Rwanda as an example of this third phenomenon. Attempts at reconciling with the memory of the Rwandan genocide are present in political discourses and in public policy. They establish a connexion between national cohesion (attachment to a country scarred by the past) and personal resilience (healing by surpassing one’s own limits), a dynamic supported by NGOs involved in this cathartic project to break away from hatred. But benevolence is

misguided when it imposes a duty for forgiveness on victims who are not yet open to excuses. It “smothers indignation”⁵ for some of these victims, and also lacks subtlety in its consideration of them according to a single homogenous profile. In other words, forgiveness entrepreneurs are mistaken in the validity of their own position. An enlightened vision of benevolence accepts these darker sides. It cannot erase them by attempting to impose benevolence. Without necessary steps, such an attempt could derail into the world described by Stanislaw Lem at the heart of his book *The Futurological Congress*, a world in which a totalitarian-leaning government alters citizens’ behaviour by releasing bombs of mutual benevolence.

You write that, “benevolence means accepting otherness as another self, as part of a relationship based on equality and not domination”: is a foreign policy based on benevolence possible? What would that involve?

Frédéric Ramel: Taking benevolence into account in foreign policy is not necessarily new. Jacqueline de Romilly described this in her excellent book dedicated to gentleness in Greek thought⁶, as did Robert Axelrod in his famous theory on cooperative behaviour (avoiding unnecessary conflicts when the other cooperates, being open if once partner prioritises an end to cooperation and being forgiving after responding to a provocation, being transparent to encourage adaptation from other players). Beyond these classical references, foreign policy based on benevolence implies a certain temperance or strategic restraint. It supposes subscribing to the harm principle through exemplarity as a way of reinforcing the principle of due diligence based on the idea that “he who can intervene to prevent harm, but does nothing, is equally guilty.” Foreign policy based on benevolence can be seen in armed conflicts, environmental protection, or human rights. It supposes that reciprocal vulnerabilities are taken into account in the context of transnational issues that expose all societies to the same risks (pandemics or climate change for example). However, these implications remain partly subject to several processes. I will only present two of them here: not succumbing to strategic excesses; and benefiting from full and entire recognition as a state, beyond the legal dimension.

Major powers adopt positions that are liable to succumb to the difficulties of the former and the weaknesses of the latter. Allow me to quote Pierre Hassner again. He compared the foreign policy restraint of Switzerland to that of Russia, invested with a civilising mission against Europe perceived as decadent. The line between “respecting differences, and affirming superiority” is a delicate one, according to him. This difficult balance sometimes provokes resentment, such as in the Russian case after the Cold War. The diplomatic marginalisation of Moscow, associated with the increasingly salient influence of the West in the post-Soviet space generated measures aiming to revive a waning identity (the annexing of Crimea, Russian military offensives in Ukraine etc.). In other words, foreign policy based on benevolence seems a delicate business, but it can by no means be confused with military intervention for the purposes of transforming political regimes—even though detractors of benevolence often use this example to deny its existence in the global space.



How the peace congress receives its first practical decision.
Cartoon by Udo J. Keppler. Image in the Public Domain

In your book, you distance yourself from two popular approaches to international relations. You write “observing and promoting benevolence in the global space also means distancing ourselves from two approaches that are currently popular. The first corresponds to critical theory, grouped under the term international political sociology [...]. The second approach is that of care.” Can you say more about this?

Frédéric Ramel: These two approaches are particularly stimulating. The first reveals the mechanisms of domination and the second emphasises altruistic behaviour in support of the most vulnerable. I have chosen to not follow either for two reasons. The first stems from my attachment to the sociology of international relations. Although I quote Foucault in the introduction, in order to shed light on benevolence as potential, echoing the idea of moral perfectionism, I am drawing more on *What is Enlightenment?* than on *Discipline and Punish*. In other words, I do not exclude the dark sides of benevolence as an instrument of domination, but nor do I make this the guiding line of my demonstration. This does not prevent the possibility of future collaboration because during a conversation with Didier Bigo on this theme, points of convergence appeared, such as the exploration of conditions (social as well as biological) that explain why a terrorist actor may not take action (thus strategic restraint).

As for the second approach, ferocious criticism such as that by Yves Michaud has reduced the philosophy of benevolence to care theory. Yet the first is much broader than the second, although both are built from the same foundation of solicitude. On the one hand, the philosophy of benevolence is based on a conception of humanity that goes beyond vulnerability, and on the other it is not limited to a politics of compassion.

Does an approach to international relations based on benevolence imply accepting a universal history that considers humanity as an indissociable whole? What place might there be for singularity in this?

Frédéric Ramel: Georg Simmel emphasised the close correlation between the development of individuality and the broadening of social ties. For him, “that individuality of being and doing increases in general to the extent that the social circle surrounding the individual

expands"⁷ In other words, there is a search for universality that operates through the recognition of singularity both of individuals (moving from quantitative individualism to qualitative individualism in the evolution of modernity) and of groups. Paul Ricoeur, a major philosopher of solicitude and hospitality, developed an understanding of universalism that was more in keeping with this perpetually renewed search for recognition. One difficulty appears, however, when we seek to extend benevolence beyond immediate circles because the more action is directed at far away strangers the more benevolence loses intensity. Moreover, it is impossible to maintain benevolence towards everyone all the time. There must be a degree of selectivity. Indeed, as the philosopher Robert Spaemann emphasises, "the receivers of benevolence are so numerous that we cannot possibly come to the aid of each in the same way."⁸

You have designed your book as a hybrid project combining references to social and human sciences but also to various arts, a hybridization that was also present in your work on music and diplomacy. How does the work of a political scientist benefit from these various sources?

Frédéric Ramel: One aspect of my research in recent decades is somewhat unusual. It explores sensitivity in the global space using images and as you have said music, whether pop music or high culture. But there is something else in this book it is important to remember – the subtitle. This is a political essay. In other words, I propose an exploration. I invite readers to lift certain veils, to embark upon an adventure. This leads to a freedom of tone that I had not yet experimented with, a style and form that is different from my previous texts. Moreover, the artistic elements are materials that allow us to shed light on political and social reality in less abrupt ways. Drawing on the work of Emeric Lhuisset on global warming or lockdowns ("The sound of Silence"), or by Saype on cooperation between cities ("Beyond Walls"), or more broadly on paintings from Holbein to Lévy-Dhurmer, I have tried to depict benevolence as attention to the other and the natural milieu, based on artistic representations. I am not the first to take this path at Sciences Po. Bruno Latour with the school of political arts, and of course, Laurence Bertrand-Dorléac, the current president of

the FNSP, are pioneers in this area. I have modestly set out to follow in their footsteps.

To conclude, can you say a few words about the very beautiful map chosen to illustrate the cover of the book?

Frédéric Ramel: This magnificent map was first shown to me by a friend, who is a CNRS researcher in medieval history, with whom I have played the recorder in a group in Lyon for the past twenty years. It is the work of Oronce Fine (1494-1555) who was the first chair of mathematics at the Collège de France and the cartographer of King François I. It is inspired by the cordiform map projections (heart-shaped) invented by the German Johannes Werner in the early 16th century. Although it is approximative due to the partial knowledge of the era (the connection between North America and Asia for example) it provides the first account of the southern lands not yet explored. Evidently, it has undeniable symbolic weight that resonates with the spirit of the book. On the one hand, bearing in mind the imagination as a human faculty that according to Bachelard “creates a higher reality”, and on the other evoking an attachment to the Earth, because to quote Zygmunt Bauman, at the end of his *Retrotopia* (2017) “we—human inhabitants of Earth—are in the either/or situation: we face either joining hands, or common graves.”

Interview by Miriam Périer, translation by Katharine Throssell.

[More about this book available here.](#)

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- 1. An acoustic reading refers to the role of listening, silence, and resonance in the everyday work of diplomats who produce sound, modulate their voices, organise concerts as instruments of representation and mediation. See Damien Mahiet, Rebekah Ahrendt, Frédéric Ramel. "Diplomacy: Audible and Resonant," *Diplomatica. A Journal of Diplomacy and Society*, 3 (2), 2021.
 - 2. "Interview with Rodrigo Tavares over Paradiplomatic Trend," IR Insider, 17 September 2018.
 - 3. Andrew Linklater, *The Problem of Harm in World Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011; *Violence and Civilization in the Western States-Systems*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016; and "Social Standards of Self Restraint in World Politics," *Spectrum Journal of World Politics*, 7(2), available online.
 - 4. Paul Ricoeur, "Sympathie et respect : phénoménologie et éthique de la seconde personne », *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, 4, October-December 1954, pp. 380-397.
 - 5. Valérie Rosoux, "Rwanda : la réconciliation idéalisée," *Déviance et société*, 2016, 40(3), p. 309.
 - 6. Jacqueline de Romilly, *La douceur dans la pensée grecque*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1978.
 - 7. Georg Simmel, *Sociologie, Etudes sur les formes de socialisation*, Paris, PUF, 1999, p. 686. Transl. A. Blasi, A. Jacobs. M Kanjirathinkal, *Inquiry into the Construction of Social Forms*, Boston, Brill, 2009 p. 621.
 - 8. Robert Spaemann, *Bonheur et bienveillance. Essai sur l'éthique*, Paris, PUF, 1997, p. 168. Transl. J Alberg, *Happiness and Benevolence*, Edinburgh, Bloomsbury, 2000, p. 120.