

## What Do We Do with Cosmopolitanism?

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Several years ago, when I was invited to give the Wellek Library Lecture Series at the University of California, Irvine, I decided to give the series of lectures on the subject of 'Cosmopolitanism and the Geographies of Freedom.' It seemed to me to be a useful and relevant topic because I had recently read Immanuel Kant's own lecture series on 'Physical Geography', which he taught for forty years at the University of Königsberg. However, his work on geography often comes across as being absolutely bizarre. This is because, on the one hand, Kant is known as a philosopher who speaks in enlightened and interesting ways about cosmopolitanism, ethics and peace, but, on the other hand, if you read his writings on geography you will find they are full of racist and discriminatory remarks. Examples abound throughout the text. First, the intelligence of the different races is ranked, and then you come across descriptions and assertions in its pages such as 'Burmese women dress outrageously and like to get pregnant by Europeans', 'The Javanese are thieving, conniving and given to irrational outbreaks of rage', or 'The Samoans are given to strong drink.' And so it goes, on and on and on.

This raises a fundamental question about how one might begin to connect the geographical account Kant gives of the world and its inhabitants with his notions of cosmopolitan morals and ethics. In other words, I thought it would be a good idea to put those two elements together and ask the following questions: What would a geographer, trying to understand the world's geographical differences, say about the cosmopolitan ethic? Is it possible to make the cosmopolitan ethic more sensitive to geographical nuances and differences, and is it possible to make geography

more sensitive to the ethical concerns that are contained in Kant's writings on cosmopolitanism? Consequently, when I was preparing for the University of California lecture series, I read all the cosmopolitan literature I could find. Afterwards I got thoroughly and completely confused, and I ended up in exactly the same position as many other commentators, including those assembled in this volume's opening provocations. For, interspersed throughout the provocations are all kinds of warnings that are in effect saying, 'Be careful, be very careful with this concept, it is dangerous and it could do all kinds of nasty things to you unless you watch out', but then they go on to say, 'But we can't do without it.'

So what do we do when confronted with a situation of this kind? Moreover, where does the motivation – the dilemma, if you like – come from in the sense of listing all the dangerous and negative things that can come out of cosmopolitanism but then arguing for its necessity? Thus, after reading everything I could find on the subject, I came to the following conclusion, which may horrify some of you: that there is not actually much difference between cosmopolitanism and liberalism, and even neoliberalism. And I am also sorry to say that even international communism suffers from very much the same set of problems. This is because, in a sense, any kind of universal code, when applied in a world of difference and inequality, is going to create injustices and is liable to be discriminatory in some way. In effect, this is the basic issue that one constantly runs up against when engaging with notions of cosmopolitanism, and it seems to be impossible to resolve. So what, then, do we do with the concept?

One of the things I have noticed over recent years is that there has been a rush to start developing what can be termed 'adjectival cosmopolitanisms'. You have *feminist* cosmopolitanism, you have *discrepant* cosmopolitanism, you have *subaltern* cosmopolitanism, you have *bourgeois* cosmopolitanism, you have a million different brands of cosmopolitanism out there, including Gyan Prakash's idea of *multiple* cosmopolitanisms in this volume. But by the time you put in things like 'rooted cosmopolitanism', you need to ask, *rooted in what?* Maybe it is rooted in the nation-state, but if so, then what is the purpose and rationale behind it? At some point, it even crossed my mind that nobody has yet proposed a fascist cosmopolitanism, but why couldn't you have one? And on this point it is worth noting that Gramsci, for example, regarded Catholic cosmopolitanism as the great enemy of emancipatory politics.

Academia being academia, a number of very different threads have recently emerged out of the different academic traditions. There is a moral philosophy tradition, including Martha Nussbaum, which usually describes in an extremely abstract way what is good and moral by going back to the ancient Greeks and contrasting what the Stoics said with the

Kantian version and so on. Then there's another tradition that comes more from the social sciences, by which I mean sociology, anthropology, political science and so forth, which is mainly concerned with the question of rights and institutional arrangements, including how these might work in relation to a globalizing capitalism, and which asks if institutional arrangements can work in a more egalitarian, more humanitarian way. This is the world of David Held and Anthony Giddens and, good God, even of Tony Blair, when he has to – which indicates something of where that problem ends up. Last, there is the cultural studies crowd, who celebrate all these hybridities, whereby somebody takes a bit of Japanese culture and plugs it into, as if it were a gene, African rhythms, all kinds of things like that – the celebratory side of it, which is about ethnic foods and the wonderful things that come out of culture.

I realized that actually all these three traditions are already very well summed up by Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*, where Marx and Engels say the bourgeoisie has ascribed a cosmopolitanism character to all production and in the process is destroying the national base of industries and creating a world market. However, the manifesto also observes how this is equally responsible for creating a world literature, which in turn can be understood as a cultural and cosmopolitan consequence of globalization. In other words, *The Communist Manifesto* offers a critique of cosmopolitanism but does not abandon the idea of a universalistic project or the possibility of creating a different and better kind of world called communism. Once more this forces us to ask, what is the difference between such a project and notions based in geographical difference? At the very least it highlights how all of these issues were already there in Marx's time and they continue to surround us today, but we are no closer to an answer.

In the book that emerged from my lecture series (Harvey 2009), I begin to address what Kant is doing and why he is doing it, if only because this also helps us understand what is going on right now. The basic problem, as Kant sets it out, has an interesting spatial order to it. We all live on a globe, which in Kant's time meant there were about a billion people living on the surface of the planet. And so Kant's question was how can a billion people occupy a globe in such a way as to not destroy each other; how can we create peaceful ways of being together? This can be understood as the essential cosmopolitan question.

If that was a big question in the late 1700s, when the globe accommodated a billion people, it is an even bigger question today when it is home to 7 billion people. By 2050, there will probably be 10 billion, and as a result, it is becoming an even more serious question. So Kant's basic question was how all of those people can occupy a finite globe in such a way

that they are not going to kill, exploit, oppress or do dastardly things to each other. This remains a crucial question we should still be asking in the twenty-first century, and it seems to me that the ecological cosmopolitanism that is emerging is asking questions of this sort: how can the global environment survive when there are 10 billion people dependent upon it?

Thus, one of the reasons why the subject of cosmopolitanism keeps coming back again and again as a topic of concern is because this question is always with us and will not go away. And what is more, it is becoming more compelling as time goes on. Kant's answer to this was as follows. He begins by saying that at first sight it would appear that World Government would be a good idea, but he then rejects this entirely on the grounds that the World Government would not be capable of being sensitive to difference. The idea that the globe is constituted by differences essentially comes out of his lecture series on anthropology, and he uses this to ask how difference and diversity can be brought together. If you brought the world's population together under one body, such as a World Government, there would be injustice and authoritarianism, to which Kant was morally opposed. Instead, the globe is turned into a Mercator map upon which there are entities called nation-states, which Kant thought should be republican in political character and have sovereignty over their territory.

The next question that arises is, how can those different sovereign states relate to each other so they do not go to war, do violent things to each other and so on? But the best Kant could come up with was a pretty weak idea, namely, that everybody in the world has a right to cross borders and be received with hospitality, but that they do not have the right to stay. A person only had the right to remain in another territory for a while, and if he or she wanted to stay for longer, they would have to appeal to the sovereign powers in that territory, whose business it was to decide.

To his credit, what this meant for Kant was that colonialism was illegitimate. Kant was anticolonial in the sense that while people should be allowed to go across borders and be received with hospitality, they cannot stay indefinitely and are under obligation to leave. They are free to cross borders, but if the host country does not grant them permission to reside there, then they are required to depart. So in this sense Kant was against colonialism and asserted that colonialism was morally illegitimate. But in practical terms, the right to cross borders was about as far as he could go, which is a substantial comedown from any big statements and claims about cosmopolitanism. When all is said and done, whilst Kant's universal principle seems to call for the syndicalist slogan that emerged from American trade union history, 'an injury to one is an injury to all', which can be read as a kind of cosmopolitan statement, in Kant's terms it only meant that you can cross borders.

Kant's framing of the question meant that cosmopolitanism could not be worked out in practical terms except through such a system – that is to say, by adopting a world system of individual nation-states that would be forced to recognize other people's rights to always cross borders. But even those rights are constrained in certain ways. Kant was not a romantic. He did not believe that humanity was inherently good and said some pretty nasty things about what human beings are really like: 'everything as a whole is made up of folly and childish vanity and often of childish malice and destructiveness' ([1970] 1991: 42). Hence, Kant was also very concerned with the idea that only certain kinds of mature individuals were actually able to achieve a truly cosmopolitan perspective, thus returning us to the critique that cosmopolitanism is nearly always elitist by definition.

Kant frequently gestures towards the idea that for the majority of the population all manner of prejudices will serve as a means of control. Unthinking masses in a republican state can be dragged this way and that way, in the manner that someone like George W. Bush, for example, can drag the population of the United States. During his presidency, Bush was actually quite a cosmopolitan character, in that his speeches were full of ideas about universal liberty and freedom. His mission in the world was to deliver universal freedom by an assortment of means, including war, which again brings us back to problematic side of cosmopolitanism as a universal agenda.

However, Kant himself went on to say something interesting and very significant towards the end of *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* ([1798] 1974), where he develops his notion of how we human beings, sitting on a globe that we call planet Earth, are all in this together. In essence, he said human beings cannot survive without peaceful coexistence, and yet they cannot avoid continuous disagreement with one another either. Kant's formulation of cosmopolitanism is not a utopian ideal in which nobody disagrees with anyone else. Consequently, he says that people are destined by nature to develop through mutual compulsion, as well as the laws that are written by them, into a cosmopolitan society that is constantly threatened by dissension but generally progresses towards a coalition.

The cosmopolitan society is in itself an unreachable Idea, but it is not a constitutive principle (which is expectant of peace amidst the most vigorous actions and reactions of men). It is only a regulative principle demanding that we yield generously to the cosmopolitan society as the destiny of the human race, and there are reasonable grounds for supposition that there is a natural inclination in this direction (Kant [1798] 1974: 249).

He then concludes: "Our intention in general is good ... yet achievement is difficult because we cannot expect to reach our goal by the free

consent of individuals, but only through progressive organization of the citizens of the earth within and toward the species as a system which is united by cosmopolitan bonds" (Kant [1798] 1974: 249). Kant's vision, then, was not one of a utopia, but instead was a practical vision that attempted to address how dissent, disagreement and difference could be organized through the state system. I would argue, therefore, that the term 'cosmopolitical' is the apposite term here insofar as it describes his project far better than cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitanism suggests a doctrine that can resolve issues. But as the provocations pointed out in their own way, cosmopolitanism simply does not have the capacity to do this in a practical world of disagreement and difference. By contrast, cosmopolitics is a process by which different persons negotiate issues that arise within different spaces in different ways.

In this sense, there is a recent history to cosmopolitics, and we ought to acknowledge what that history is. Woodrow Wilson, for example, was clearly a great liberal figure, but was also cosmopolitical in terms of his role in founding the League of Nations. The formation of the United Nations was a cosmopolitical event. The negotiation of the Bretton Woods agreement was a cosmopolitical event. The G20 summits are cosmopolitical events whereby people are attempting to find a global solution to the mess caused by the latest economic crisis. However, it is a global solution that is going to be arrived at by a technocratic elite: the central bankers, the treasury secretaries and so forth are the ones who are essentially going to decide. In effect, it is going to be a coalition: a coalition that comes together to create a cosmopolitical event. When you start to look at the world of cosmopolitics, it becomes unavoidable that cosmopolitical events occur again and again and again. For instance, when nations attempt to negotiate something like the Montreal Protocol, they create a cosmopolitical event. Cosmopolitical events of this kind need to be looked at very closely in terms of exactly what they do. It is also necessary to recognize the class character of these kinds of events. The Bretton Woods agreement, as far as I know, had no popular representation. The G20 summits do not have any popular representation. Michael Bloomberg, the former mayor of New York City, is a very cosmopolitan figure, and he wanted New York to be a cosmopolitan city, welcoming to everybody, except those who are homeless or have no income. Consequently, during his tenure as mayor he did absolutely nothing to help the homeless, but he did announce in the wake of the financial crisis that he would give \$45 million to retrain Wall Street executives. He wanted New York to remain a cosmopolitan city that retains an elite group of financial wizards, who perhaps are not so wizardly any more. The established economic order has become unglued, and as a consequence cosmopolitics starts to become incredibly important,

which means oppositional movements also have to form a cosmopolitical configuration.

In New York, the Right to the City alliance is now uniting with other movements in other cities to create a national movement. The Right to the City group went to then Mayor Bloomberg's conference about the future of New York, to which he had invited all of his Wall Street friends. They walked in and said they thought they ought to say something about what was going on in the city, and they promptly got arrested and thrown in jail. They are beginning to work in a cosmopolitical way, because one of the things you cannot do – and this is one of the unfortunate things that is currently happening on the left – is withdraw from the idea that there is a cosmopolitan project to be fought for. You have to go for it. Right to the City movements are also present in Brazil and, in fact, the concept of a 'right to the city' is written into the Brazilian constitution. This shows how there are the beginnings of international discussions over people's rights to the city. That is the strength of the World Social Forum and the ideas and approaches that are coming out of it that focus on a notion of sub-altern cosmopolitanism. It is a substitution, if you like, for a working-class cosmopolitanism, but it says that we – the downtrodden – have to have a cosmopolitical project as well. One of the historical difficulties with the World Social Forum was the tendency of its members to say that 'we are not interested in talking to someone over there'. The result was to almost abandon cosmopolitical perspectives altogether. But you cannot do that if you want to challenge inequality, and it seems to me there is a push to change absolute localism. For example, one of the incredible moments at a recent World Social Forum was when the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra, the landless workers' movement in Brazil, announced that they had decided to do two political things. First, they announced their international solidarity with the Palestinians in Gaza and their intention to organize politically around the country on that question – and they are very good at organizing politically. Second, they announced their intention to go after Petrobras and the oil companies in connection to their role in Nigeria and the Niger delta. They can create trouble for Petrobras inside Brazil, and they intend to do so politically. In this we see the emergence of a cosmopolitical politics.

Thus, we must get away from imagining there is some kind of theoretical apparatus up there. This means rejecting the moral philosophy epitomized by Martha Nussbaum's approach to dreaming about the world, and also repudiating David Held's kind of practical politics that sits side by side with the neoliberal project and does not seem to offer anything other than a slight ethical mask for neoliberal practices, such as dispossession. If you get away from that way of thinking about cosmopolitics, you begin to

realize that there are cosmopolitical projects worth supporting and fighting for that are based in a cosmopolitical project of a very different kind. Indeed, there are some very profound things that have happened that way – I think that the feminist movement, for example, has a cosmopolitical project, and in many ways this has worked quite well despite getting tangled up in geographical differences. Likewise, there are currently important cosmopolitical projects around issues of labour.

And so I have come to the conclusion, as I said, that you cannot do without cosmopolitanism, but there is always going to be this fundamental question about whose cosmopolitical project are you going to back? And you cannot think you can just talk about cosmopolitanism in academic or philosophical terms. At some level, you are going to have to engage in the politics, and that means engaging in the cosmopolitics on the ground by working alongside and in relation to actual political movements seeking social justice. Academics and intellectuals have to be engaged with these political movements. This is something to which I am personally deeply committed, and so I will leave it there.

## References

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