

Chapter 8

Cosmopolitan Theory and the Daily Pluralism of Life

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Drawing on my own experience, I will try to connect the world of philosophy and academia with the world in which people live their daily lives. That is, I will try to connect a cosmopolitan dimension to practical things in order to speak to the problem that confronts us when trying to develop a theoretical framework that encompasses the challenge of connecting the abstract principles of philosophy to the demands of everyday life. Of course, part of the problem is that in theory and in practice there are many ways that the term ‘cosmopolitanism’ is actually applied.

What I am trying to do here is tackle a very simple question that links the realm of Western philosophy, and in particular Kant, with the following practical question. Is it possible to connect a sense of universal values and principles to a specific local commitment towards belonging? A significant part of the problem is that academics ask this simple question in ways that are so complex and wilfully theoretical that discussion is inaccessible to us in our daily life. We cannot understand what we are talking about when we try to apply the universal to our specific conditions; we become lost.

So our challenge is to move past an often-inaccessible frame of reference of cosmopolitan theory in order to obtain a sense of the reachable complexity of our everyday lives, which is a completely different kind of complexity. Here I think the word that we need is ‘reconciliation’ – and you will see me refer to it many times in the following pages. Reconciliation is central to the personal and the political and, as such, it has many different dimensions. To be able to say I am the mirror of your own reconciliation, the reconciliation with your own self, is how I put it in a recent

book (Ramadan 2009). Therefore, the ‘other’ *is us* and is *in us*. This is a philosophy of pluralism built on the process of reconciliation, in which by becoming reconciled with yourself, you may be able to find a place for me within your own world conception.

As part of the practicality of this process of reconciliation, of trying to reach people and connect with society, I think we have to ask, how do we connect universities and cities? And we have to ask about citizenship, identity and a sense of belonging in ways that connect the university with the municipality, because this reconciliation also concerns power, politics and socioeconomic problems. We cannot approach this form of reconciliation by understanding each other in terms of a very idealized and abstracted concept of cultural differences; such a concept cannot be part of our approach to cosmopolitanism.

For me, it is very important to start with these kinds of projects in order to go beyond elite ghettos such as the university. In fact, it is very difficult to speak about cosmopolitanism when you are in a world where you are not connected to the people whom you should be serving. And you are not doing your job, which is really to share with the people anything that has to with all these theories of universality. Because at the end of the day, the purpose of academia is not to think and engage with the world’s pressing questions while removed from the people, but to think about these questions while located where the people are, so as to try to find solutions to the problems that we are facing today as they appear from everyday social perspectives. So in a way the challenge of cosmopolitan theory remains a simple and practical question. It is a challenge that connects a sense of universal values and principles with specific local commitments. In other words, it is one we must first deal with in our daily life.

My approach is not to begin with the theoretical framework abstracted from the practical answers. I try to do exactly the opposite, which means utilizing an inductive process. I begin from what I see on the ground, and then assess what philosophers and religious scholars can tell us. This inductive process is not about comparing theories but rather about comparing what we are experiencing at the grassroots level in order to question, and if necessary challenge, existing philosophical perspectives. As a Muslim scholar, a European Muslim scholar, I am often faced with people asking me what my assessment of rationality and the Enlightenment is, as if the world of rationality is not connected to ideology. They ask as if Kant was speaking about universal values without addressing his political stance or a vision of culture that was patronizing and imperialist. He may have been against colonization, but when it comes to values and principles, he nevertheless remained rooted in the West. This critical discussion must be part of our approach to all philosophers, including those Muslim

scholars who say ‘at the end they may be quite good, but still we are a bit better’.

There is nothing that is objective. There is no pure rationality. Rationality is always connected to a political outlook, to a cultural understanding of the world and a vision of the world. This is practical, and it is necessary to assess philosophy through these frameworks by grounding our understanding in our involvement within daily life. For me this critical stance arises from an inductive process that allows us to deconstruct and distinguish what we can support in any philosophy and helps us identify what we need to discard. Thus, when I speak about a cosmopolitan project I am thinking about it as a means to nurture the world’s conscience through a critical, grounded philosophy, which is why it is important to distinguish what our question is and how to answer it. This means we critically approach a universalizing notion of world citizenship in order to suggest a cosmopolitics that is based on a relationship between a philosophical world conscience and people’s local commitments, responsibilities, duties and understandings. It is from this perspective – i.e., one that by being rooted locally allows us to simultaneously approach the local, national and international contexts – that we can talk about a cosmopolitan universalism.

This connection between the local and the universal is important. But why? Because for me, connecting the local, national and universal is a way to humble potential philosophical and even religious arrogance. In practice, you can assess whether a nice-sounding philosophy that makes reference to world values and universalism is not in fact connected to an unequal power relationship. It could be that when you assess what underlies the political, cultural and civilizational relationship underlying the philosophy by those who are very skilled at speaking about universal values, you find there is a power struggle. A struggle that has something to do with various dimensions of power, including gender. You can see this process at work within religious thoughts and religious productions in the Islamic, Catholic and Jewish traditions. We can find this in all these religions: the traditions may be speaking in an idealized way about values but disconnecting these from the practical dimension.

So for me, there is no other response to these abstractions than to identify the relationship between appeals to a world conscience and universal values and something that is more practical. And whenever we speak of cosmopolitanism we have to take this approach. It is in this intersection between world conscience, universal values and local attachments that I put citizenship. Because citizenship is a sense of responsibilities, rights and duties that cannot be reduced to saying simply, ‘Okay, I belong to the world.’ Citizenship often does not work like that, because when you say ‘I belong

to the world' it is always necessary to account for what this means practically. How do you transfer belonging to the world – practically speaking – into questions of equality and social justice? How do you assess access to power, not only in a theoretical way, but in terms of daily life?

This approach to the question of citizenship as it exists in practice helps us to practically assess Kant's model of cosmopolitanism. In other words, the theoretical can be approached through a critical perspective when cosmopolitan and universal ethics are humbled through the questions of daily life. For it is apparent that Kant had a view on culture in the same way that he had a view on power and on the hierarchy between the different civilizations. And this is something we can find in religious thought as well. Many of the scholars in my own Islamic tradition speak in a very nice, accepting way about the universal values of our religion. But when you go to look at the way they deal with other cultures on a practical day-to-day basis, it also becomes apparent that there is something that is not universal; namely, there is unequal power. At the end of the day, many seem to be saying, 'We have the right vision and answer and all others have the wrong answer or the wrong approach to the question.'

Establishing whether there is actually a practical link between claims about universal values and our local daily life and national experience makes possible a philosophy that helps us to live together and avoid conflicts. But this does not mean we can or should avoid disagreement. Rather, this is a call to manage disagreement in a peaceful way and accept a diversity of perspectives. Diversity and pluralism is easy to theorize but is not always easy to manage when placed in practical contexts. If you look at our societies now, why is it that in Western societies there is a great deal of fear? Is it simply because of pluralism and because multiple cultures, and multiple religions, are not easy to manage? It is not always easy to live with multiplicity, but at the same time it is no longer possible to hold on to a sense of monolithic or homogeneous culture – even at the level of theory, perception and rhetoric – because the sense that we're all in the same boat is continually challenged by new migrations and different ways of being in the world. And this is what often makes the situation seem difficult.

My question about pluralism is simple, but it can nevertheless reconcile us to living with complexity. Because reconciling ourselves to this complexity is really to understand that we have to have a rational, reasonable approach to the question of diversity. If not, we are going to be driven by emotions. Throughout the world and especially in industrialized society, we are experiencing three dimensions of irrationality that have to be addressed. The first dimension is the politics of fear. People are scared and they are driven by their emotions. When people are driven by emotions, such as fear, they are more liable to undermine the very meaning of the

democratic process. If your emotions are deciding for you, it means that the democratic process, the critical debate that is necessary for a democratic society, becomes undermined. We have to deal with this. We share a common humanity, but it is often experienced through the frame of conflicting emotions.

The second dimension is a politics of symbols. When, for example, Barack Obama was elected in 2008, no one could deny that politically it was a significant symbolic victory. But it was still important to be careful and critical about what was being symbolized. People were saying, 'Yes, we have now succeeded in overcoming race. American politics and society are beyond race because an African American is the president of the United States.' However, the reality is that after eight discouraging years of the Bush administration, two things were projected onto Obama: positive emotions and a politics of symbols. But here the symbolic dimension is once again misleading. For what was actually being said or changed in concrete and practical terms? Once more, at the abstract level of philosophical, political and cultural discourse, people were idealizing the process and revealing a level of confusion. And when people are confused their emotions are not far behind. Very often when it comes to a sense of belonging, identity, citizenship, living together and universal values, we are mostly driven by an emotional or ideological take on the process, and in such circumstances emotion and ideology can be used to confuse the process further and distort reality.

It is precisely at this point that we need to reconcile ourselves with complexity, and we have to do it in practical terms. For if we are serious about a cosmopolitan take on our societies – which at the grassroots level means to reconcile people with a sense of the world's complexity and interconnectedness – it is necessary to engender a sense of 'I need to know, I need to understand myself, the other, the society, the processes'. This is what can be referred to as deconstructing without disconnecting. Deconstructing the complex fields of interaction to understand how things actually work so as to be able to deal with difference and disjunction in practical settings and reconcile ourselves with each other. This, I argue, is the type of philosophical tradition that we now need to build.

We find that in all traditions around the world, the big question is the quest for meaning, understanding and a purpose through which we can make sense of and live our lives. This is currently the major challenge in a consumerist society and neoliberal system. And yet our education system is not asking this question. It is not a question of being an efficient citizen; it is a question of asking what it means to be a human being. Where is this question in our religions? Whether we consider ourselves to be religious or secular, we are driven to define ourselves against the other. In either

case, this is a mode of self-definition that is not based on the central quest for the meaning of being human. And we have to ask, what does citizenship consist of without this quest for meaning?

The third dimension to address is the relationship between philosophy and religion within contemporary societies. And we have to deal with this urgently. Anyone who claims that secular or modern society means there is no religion is wrong. On the contrary, the problem we have now is the blaze of religions in our secular society. So to deny this state of affairs or avoid the question does not provide a coherent approach or answer to the problem. To avoid the question is to create further problems concurrently and in the future. We cannot avoid this question of the relationship between philosophy and religion – whoever you are, whatever your background. If we are serious about living together, we have to frame this question in terms of negotiating the present and building the future. We need to try to understand the ways in which we can live together. Tell us how things appear from where you are and when you speak, speak to who I am, rather than who I am not. Let us have this critical discussion in our society.

The same approach must be applied to examining current political discourse. We have to address who is now setting the scene of our political discourses. Even if it is not coming from the far right anymore, it is increasingly apparent that what was said yesterday by the far-right party is now being said by the mainstream parties. A process of culturalizing politics and culturalizing socioeconomic problems is occurring because there is no socioeconomic policy. So when there is no ready-made societal answer or a ready-made way to deal with political issues, the response is to regionalize and culturalize them. So we hear, 'These people may have a problem because they are Muslim or because they are black or because they come from another culture.' This response is dangerous. Democracy, when the politicians are liable to substitute cultural explanation for politics, is dangerous for all of us. How is it possible to obtain a sense of cosmopolitan understanding if, when it comes to the most pressing problems, we are confusing everything? We are encouraged to speak of *culture* when the issue is really *politics* and in the process we sideline any genuine philosophical quest for meaning.

I think, then, that these three dimensions are among the main challenges we face if we are to build on contemporary theories and practices of cosmopolitanism and understand what a cosmopolitan society might look like. To do so it is necessary to tackle these three interrelated but different fields of culture, politics and philosophy and deconstruct them from a practical perspective that is aware of its own and others' locality. To understand these fields is also to know where we, ourselves and others have come from and to be aware of where we are going. To do so, we also need to reconcile the relationship between ourselves as citizens and ourselves

as people within academia. If we as people within academia are reaching out and trying to work together to propose a platform for discussion with fellow citizens around the city, we also need to ask ourselves in what way are we going to try to do that?

The first area of concern, as mentioned, involves a reconciliation with philosophy, and here I also mean religious philosophies, because religions also produce philosophies about what it means to be a human being. It is from this perspective that we need to think about and understand different identities. 'Identity' is a key word within contemporary discourse, and we have to be very clear about how to approach the role of identity when attempting reconciliation with or between philosophies. To do this from a cosmopolitan perspective we need to say, 'I have multiple identities', and this is also a reason why wounded identities are becoming increasingly important insofar as they also bring in different psychological experiences of belonging and displacement. It is not possible to obtain a sense of people's multiple identities without understanding the processes of belonging. Moreover, we may have multiple belongings and complex connections among identities, localities and belongings.

However, to develop this understanding of multiple identities and belongings we have to trust each other. And the problem that currently confronts us and undermines any attempts at reconciliation or forming a common worldview is that we do not trust each other. I am not even sure that we trust ourselves, that we are confident of our own values, which returns us to the question of knowledge, and in particular knowledge of the self. If it is not possible to obtain such knowledge through schooling and education, then it has to be done in society by reinforcing the link between philosophy, cosmopolitan understanding and daily life. To understand ourselves and each other via the sense of belonging that is forged through daily practice, we have to deal with psychology. I have been working with Muslim communities in the West, and I find that I am dealing more with psychology than anything else, insofar as it is not a legal problem but rather a problem of self-confidence.

The second field concerns politics and economy. And I am sorry, but we still have to talk about power, we still have to talk about colonization, we still have to talk about class, we still have to talk about discrimination and we still have to talk about gender. For it is not possible to have a politics without a discussion about inequalities and how they are legitimated through ideas about cultural difference. This means we have to reconcile ourselves also with the economic dimension of continuing unequal power. Whenever people in Africa or Asia say, 'What are you talking about? You are talking as if imperialism was over, but we are dealing with economic imperialism. We are slaves of an order that we cannot decide', then we have to take their critique into account.

The last field concerns something that is not being tackled directly but is nevertheless central: arts, culture and creativity. This is important because it is not about differentiating between exotic cultures but rather about challenging the world culture that we have now. We have to take creativity and the imagination into account, because wherever new ideas and new forms come from – whether that is Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia or the Americas – creativity is central to any discussion of cosmopolitanism. The street creativity, the street culture, what is happening now – and why it is happening now – reminds us of the kind of creative resistance developing on the ground. We have to ask about our response and our stance to such cultures of resistance.

I believe that these are the fields that we have to strive to connect, not so much in terms of their theoretical connections but in terms of their practical relationships. I want it to be practical because this allows us to facilitate creation at our own level – both on the ground and in the academy. It starts with us, and the new ‘we’ begins by having this discussion and recognizing the quest for meaning that we have in common while also being aware of the different fields of experience we must encompass. It means being able to talk about politics again and being able to speak about arts and to share. It is also about being able to make a difference between the principles that we are sharing and the models that we never share. This is important because to be able to study the models of the other can help us to be more humble about the claims of our own modelling of history and the world.

There are three ethical values that I would put together in order to bring about this cosmopolitan vision, three main values that I would say we have to nurture in ourselves. The first one is humility, because no one has the monopoly on anything, including knowledge and power. The second one is respect. Respect recognizes and draws upon the other that is in us; it is the mirror, the reconciliation that each of us must go through in relation to ourselves but is predicated upon attempting to understand the other. The final one is consistency. Consistency must be a self-critical process whereby one assesses and reconciles one’s moral values and activities with those that you are trying to promote at the grassroots level. This is the relationship between theory and practice. And this is the way I think that we can come to share much more than we think we do.

References

- Ramadan, T. 2009. *What I Believe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.