

Cosmopolitanism

Concept: Cosmopolitanism

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Description The term "cosmopolitanism" derives from the Greek words *cosmos* and *polites*, meaning citizen (those who belong to the polis, the city) of the world. The junction of these two ideas is, to say the least, paradoxical. It combines two forms of belonging that have traditionally been at odds with one another, especially in the modern state system, where identities tend to be portrayed exclusively in relation to a national heritage, usually defined by birth, descent, or choice. On one hand, we have the polis, the local or particular space, traditionally territorially bounded, where life in community takes place. On the other hand, we have the cosmos, the drive towards a common universality, a space in which ideas such as "humanity" and universal rights could be realized, a space that dispenses with borders. It is no surprise that since the 1990s, with the growing interest in issues related to globalization and global governance, we have been witnessing a revival in the literature and in the global media of the idea of a "cosmopolitan order."

Though the concept has its roots in Greek and Roman politics, its persistence in Western discourse is mainly derived from Immanuel Kant's work on perpetual peace and, more specifically, on his 1784 essay entitled "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent." Kant maintains that humans are marked by an "unsociable sociability"—that is, the antagonism between our social and individual drives, which would lead, in a progressive and teleological manner, towards a "civil condition." This civility would bring about a higher order space, not marked by a world government, but by a world federation of republican states in which citizens from particular countries would all come together in a "condition of lawful association with one another" (Benhabib 2004, 39).

In this sense, cosmopolitanism is different from universalism, though it may encompass, in its different versions, some universalist claims. The idea of universalism is premised upon the moral and ethical aspects that connect humankind. It is framed against particularistic ideas of belonging and of organizing social life. Universalism is based on the refusal of an individualistic approach to understanding society and on a rejection of values that tend to portray peoples and communities as culturally or territorially specific. Bobbio (1983) uses the *Res Publica Christiana* of the Middle Ages as an example of universalist doctrine. Men were equal because they were all sons of God and a Christian community would flourish according to religious ideals. On one side, the Pope claimed a universal dimension for the Church's political powers, which subjugated the overlapping authorities of princes and of a feudal system. On the other

side, its universalism inhibited the possibility of claims centered on an individual right of choice among competing religious options (Bobbio 1983, 295). It was then a dogmatic universalism aimed at erasing any trace of difference, notably of diverse religious affiliations.

Cosmopolitanism, as conveyed by Kant, did not have the ambition of forming a supranational authority, nor the universalist claim of overcoming the nation-state power to define the content of a good life for its political communities. Its universalism was centered on a condition of humanity that unites all, in tension with the particularisms of belonging to specific cultural and political societies. It was also an individualistic project since a cosmopolitan order, according to this view, was a space based on a common humanity that makes it possible for every person to ascertain her or his rights in relation not only to their states of origin, but mostly in relation to others.

It is fair to say that mainstream discussions on cosmopolitanism, especially from the 1990s onwards and inserted into the larger framework of globalization processes, are based on a cosmopolitan project derived from Kant and seventeenth/eighteen century rationalism. They are articulated in the belief that globalization is fostering the creation of a space beyond state borders (though states remain an important element of social life) in which it is possible for subjects to move, articulate demands, and participate in political processes without mediation. Among the major characteristics of mainstream cosmopolitanism is its focus on the person as the bearer of rights and obligations (Calhoun 2003) that "aim to premise political life into a community of law that makes us not local but global citizens" (Scholte 2005). A good example is the fact that individuals might now pursue their cases in International Courts, for example in the Interamerican Court of Human Rights, without the need of being represented by their states of origin, and sometimes their claims are directed precisely against those states. Consequently, the rise of a global cosmopolitan order would be linked to the emergence of new forms of regulation based on a cosmopolitan law. The bearers of rights and duties would be global citizens, rather than the traditional focus on states as provided by International Law. Individual and collective rights would be framed according to a sense of belonging to a global community, thus surpassing the boundaries of domestic legislation and restricting the reach of nation-state sovereignty.

Global justice, human rights, and environmental rights would all be themes that have to do with the emergence of cosmopolitan normative structures, since they relate directly to individuals and communities, whatever their prior national/territorial affiliations might be. They all relate to problems that affect us, wherever we live and are thus framed according to a common space. Let's take the discussion on global warming, for example. The increase in global temperatures affects those who live in urban cities and rural areas; crops depend on rain and certain amounts of heat and energy is based in much of the world on water-based electricity. The melting of

polar ice caps affects communities in the extreme North and threatens countries with significant coastal areas. The sustainability of natural resources depends on a delicate balance menaced by human interventions, affecting us all regardless of where we live. Many countries and organizations have been pressing for an encompassing set of rules that would regulate CFC emissions, promote sustainable forms of natural resources exploitation, new forms of renewable energy, and so on. Increasingly we have been witnessing the emergence of an environmental framework, though still far from a comprehensive one, which takes the global environment as a framework of reference.

A second characteristic is the fact that cosmopolitanism reflects a Western view of the world (Calhoun 2003). Not only is it premised on the idea of the human being as a rational individual, capable of making her or his own decisions, but also it portrays a progressive understanding of human history. The path towards cosmopolitanism is seen as a sign of progress, of human "enlightenment," of achieving a more sustainable and civilized life. Cultural traits are seen as parochial and backward. Religious affiliations should be separated from decisions regarding political life. Traditional values and practices are portrayed as traces of underdeveloped communities. As such, technology is considered an important tool in allowing for the creation of global spaces and achieving cosmopolitanism, by enabling direct and instantaneous exchanges of information and intercultural dialogues.

So, according to the mainstream conception of cosmopolitanism, who can be a "citizen of the world"? As Calhoun (2003) puts it, "how does it relate to the non-cosmopolitan side of globalization"? Let's go back to our example of global warming policies. We highlighted the fact that those policies take the "earth" and its resources as a common aspect of sustainable life in the planet. But it is also important to stress the fact that the impact of environmental changes varies according to where we stand on global processes. If it is true that both indigenous communities in the Amazon forest and US orange farmers in Florida would be affected by an increase in temperatures and all its subsequent effects, it is also true that they perceive, receive, and respond to these effects in very different and unequal ways. Whereas for the indigenous communities this would represent the collapse of their form of life; for the farmers in the US it may foster an increase in the use of technology and of costs of production. For some, usually marginalized from discourses over the global, these changes are a question of immediate survival. They are directly affected by global processes, and thus have a higher stake in the forging of a cosmopolitan order, but are normally excluded from the circles where this cosmopolitan order is being framed, be they the UN headquarters in Geneva or New York, or the Environmental Summits in Rio de Janeiro and Montreal. At most, their voices are heard only through problematic mediations made by usually Western-based NGOs.

A few years ago, a reality show was broadcasted on a major US TV

channel in many parts of the world. One family from a major city in the United States had to live a couple weeks within a community usually in Africa, Asia, or Latin America. These communities were usually indigenous and as consequence were located in rural areas. Decisions were collectively made or based on the judgment of tribe leaders or elders. They ate raw food, had no access to energy or any form of industrial technology. Though the objective was to see the adjustments produced by cultural encounters, the program reflected the taken-for-granted idea that indigenous, traditional communities are, to a certain extent, barbaric in their practices. It is telling that upon their return to New York, Los Angeles, or Chicago, most families praised their time with their hosts, but were glad to live in a modern, developed civilization. In the end, the show was not so much about what those families learned, but mainly about how they judged the practices of the community with which they had to engage. What this program showed is precisely this "non-cosmopolitan" side of globalization, one that discriminates between societies and leaves a significant part of the world outside. Traditional communities are only included through development programs that, at times, aim at disrupting traditional ways of survival and social organization. It reflects an elitism pervasive in many cosmopolitical accounts, which privileges those who are in direct contact with global cities, notably located in the Northern, advanced countries, and who are able to consume global goods and trademarks. Being a "citizen of the world" is summarized then in an individual ability to partake in the way of life of globalization sites, with all its often-repeated icons: drinking Coca-Cola, watching CNN, eating a Big Mac, or waiting for the next flight in the frequent flyers lounge at Heathrow, Hong Kong, Paris, or JFK in New York.



Hong Kong's International Airport receives more than 40 million passengers every year and is considered a main connecting point to most parts of Southeast Asia. Its modern, impersonal architecture, combined with the traffic of people, is emblematic of cosmopolitical space and its subjects. (Photo: Exhibition Hong Kong www.gaikei.com)

In a nutshell, mainstream cosmopolitanism is based on the building of a normative order premised upon traits that connect individuals to a higher global order. As Scholte notes, cosmopolitanism embraces a vision of humanity in which "humankind becomes a 'we' facing problems where there are no 'others'." Cosmopolitanism recognizes that we, as individuals, belong to multiple spheres at the same time: family, church, school, work associations, regional, and global — non-territorial forms of collective identity (as bearers of different genders, races, classes, disabilities, and so on). However, cosmopolitanism implies that global scale identities have primacy over our territorial forms of belonging. They highlight the aspects that make us individual members of a "transplanetary polity" (Scholte 2005).

Our examples have focused on some themes that exemplify such a global "polis": human rights, environment, democracy, and global justice. However, as highlighted, cosmopolitanism also has its dangers. First, it privileges a Western understanding of what a global citizenship encompasses. It reproduces the individual as the global citizen, thus discriminating against communities that place authority and rights as a collective, community matter. It is premised on the belief of a progressive history, portraying cultural diversity and tradition as obstacles to a cosmopolitan order. In such a cosmopolitan world, the formation of a global culture is presumed to be harmonious, requiring then the erasure of difference and of those societies and traditions deemed to be non-modern or dangerous. In its belief of a "unified and peaceful realm of humankind," cosmopolitanism shows its ethnocentric roots since it underestimates the power of specific attachments in defining cultural, ethnic, religious, gender, racial, and other multiple identities (Tomlinson 1999).

Second, cosmopolitanism, though privileging a global scale membership, is still very much rooted in a state-centric perspective of political life. At its center is the difficult tension between a transplanetary polity, a "cosmopolis" that depends upon the particular political order, the "polis," to realize itself. It fails to respond to the question of how, for example, to enable human rights outside the state. In many parts of the world, states are the major violators of human rights. Take the case of the Former Yugoslavia, where the Serbian State promoted a violent politics of ethnic cleansing against Albanian Kosovars. Despite the creation of an International War Crimes' Tribunal to punish those involved (a fact some claim represents the emergence of a cosmopolitical order), the realization of human rights depends still very much on the ability of forging a new political arrangement in its territory that could deal with issues of property

restitution, pacific coexistence of ethnic minorities, equal rights to political voice within a multiethnic environment, and so on. Even the idea of a global "citizenship" echoes the ways in which we frame the political relationship of belonging between individuals and state.

Third, cosmopolitanism, in this view, is highly exclusive. It privileges a "corporate/NGO capitalism" (Calhoun 2003) for nothing is more cosmopolitan than capital. It flows across borders, imposes its logics and produces its own privileged "global travelers." Many argue that cosmopolitanism is not only a revitalization of a neo-liberal capitalist "imperialism," with its property rights, trademarks, and global icons of consumption and ways of production, but also a form of "cultural imperialism" that imposes upon different societies a singular form of life. But the issue of exclusion touches more deeply the inequalities of globalization processes: what are the relevant issues in the cosmopolitan agenda and who gets to define them? In sum, this form of cosmopolitanism "requires too much travel, too many dinners out at ethnic restaurants, too much volunteering with Médecins sans Frontières" without dealing with a "deeper understanding of political life" (Calhoun 2003, 100).

So are there other possibilities for cosmopolitanism? 11 September 2001 represented a blow to the cosmopolitan project. The return to a power politics, the war on terror, and all its unilateralist and violent policies made it increasingly hard to think in cosmopolitical terms. Nevertheless, it also represented an important turning point in rethinking what a cosmopolitan sphere might mean. Critical authors, especially from a post-colonial orientation, have begun to underscore the fact that there is a multiplicity of universals, or rather various interpretations of what universal principles might mean in specific contexts. There are then "situated universals" (Pollock et al. 2002) or "engaged universals" (Tsing 2005). They emphasize how "grand" ideas about humanity, justice, and environmental global rights are only realized in particular contexts, in those specific moments where they come to life and acquire meaning. They emphasize an open conception of plural "cosmopolitanisms," based on "a translational process of culture's in-betweenness" (Pollock et al. 2002, 6). The idea of cosmopolitanisms is forged upon the value of difference that takes seriously the inequalities of globalization processes. It emphasizes the requirement of solidarity and resistance as necessary aspects for putting forward the cosmopolitical. It becomes a practice, not a project. It is not about going from some point in history towards a higher moment in the civilizational process; it is about the multiple possibilities and activities we (and an enlarged "we" that encompasses not only those inhabiting the developed world, but also migrants, Inuit, refugees, or Aymaras — indigenous communities in Southern Peru and Northern Bolivia) do and engage with every day. It is about respect for the different ways we approach life, tell our stories, and affect each other. It is not simply a sense of engaging with reality by watching CNN World News, especially because a large part of the world population does not have access to television or technological advances.

In this sense, cosmopolitanism becomes much more complex and, certainly more difficult to grasp, but also more attuned to how our local realities and contexts are affected, and also productively construct our understanding of the global. Think, for example, how Mayan communities in Chiapas have tried to mobilize themselves in order to ascertain their participation on decision-making processes and guarantee the survival of their culture and subsistence centered on natural resources. Think of refugees' and migrants' mobilizations in the neighbourhoods of Los Angeles, Chicago, Paris, Toronto, and Cairo. All these groups are engaged with some form of cosmopolitical value or normative order, be it justice, human rights, or democracy. They all speak to an audience that is global and their problems are directly embedded in global governance structures: in Chiapas, they are affected by the results of trade agreements within the World Trade Organization and the North American Free Trade Agreement; for refugees and migrants, with the global regime of refugee and foreign worker's protection, just to name a few. Nevertheless, their understandings of those values and their mechanisms of advocating for them are not based on a search for a common denominator beyond difference. They are instead rooted in the multiple ways in which these differences are played out and performed in the global/local realities they live in. The idea of unfinished, plural cosmopolitanisms brings to light the need to focus on these translational processes and on those subjects who have been marginalized or totally excluded from mainstream cosmopolitan projects. It is, in this sense, an attempt to rescue the value of cosmopolitanism, in an increasingly globalized and violent world, without resorting to the same violences and exclusions that have marked the history of cosmopolitanism.

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