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The Cosmopolitan Project: Revealing the Moral and Political Agenda

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Is cosmopolitan politics too idealistic? Whether it is the multicultural cosmopolitans such as Will Kymlicka or the normative liberals such as Seyla Benhabib, or whether it is an economic cosmopolitan fighting for equal distribution or the classical cosmopolite trying to revive the retro themes that paved the way for the current movement: the same criticisms are usually given. Where is this call for cosmopolitan ideals coming from? Is it an indication of a more discrete global phenomenon yet to be revealed? Or is it simply, actually, just an age-old philosophical question hiding in the guise of a more modern form? This paper hopes to explore these notions coming from the perspective of the problems that cosmopolitan moral theories have attempted to answer. There are common concerns and interests that cosmopolitan philosophers choose to focus on and these issues are indicative of the very nature of the project's agenda. At its core, the cosmopolitan project holds the unique position of providing a solid platform for the discourse of contemporary issues while utilizing classical tropes in philosophy. The contention of this paper is that while this is not necessarily a bad thing, it still bears examination.

The goal of this paper is to show that cosmopolitan morality offers more than just a reminder of what is essential for the human condition. Underlying these themes is a call for the dangers of not heeding the global condition: the issues that should be a concern for all of us, regardless of our state affinity. This is because at the heart of each cosmopolitan, whether classic or contemporary, there is a focus on humanism with, what Andrew Linklater calls, an emancipatory intent.⁽¹⁾ And because of this characteristic, this theme can be observed in the different variations of cosmopolitan theories.

The first part of this paper will discuss the various cosmopolitanisms that

have cropped up and are popular still. The second part will be a discussion on how these questions and the methodologies employed have similar tracts which they follow because of the current global scenario. To conclude, I will attempt to explain how these similar tracts point to the moral and political agenda of the cosmopolitan project.

Different Cosmopolitanisms

There are various ways in which cosmopolitanism as a philosophical problem can be understood. There are also various ways in which the term can be defined. For example, the Stoics were “fond of saying that the cosmos is, as it were, a polis, because the cosmos is put in perfect order by law, which is right reason.”⁽²⁾ The Greeks, whose concept of democracy and politics were propped on an elitist form of social structure, were not exactly cosmopolitan thinkers in the way that we understand the word nowadays. However, the term itself did come from them and when Cynic Diogenes “was asked where he came from, he replied, ‘I am a citizen of the world [kosmopolitês]’ ” (Diogenes Laertius VI 63).⁽³⁾ This is the earliest definition of cosmopolitanism but it still does not capture how cosmopolitanism is academically used nowadays.

Maybe it will help if we recalled how citizenship was understood in ancient Greek politics. Citizens (albeit only men of a certain status) were directly involved in matters of state. If we attach this to the notion of cosmopolitanism, it could then be viewed as political involvement on a global scale. However, is it possible for political action to be understood from such a perspective? The Greek polis and its public sphere is one thing, but are such political actions possible from a macro level, that of a global scale? A citizen has a right to make his views known and has a responsibility to be involved in the decisions of the state. At least this is true in theory, especially in democratic, liberal societies and in modern societies, the concept of political representation has replaced this right and responsibility. The transition then from the city-state, to a modern state, to “the idea of” a cosmopolitan state may lead to the

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notion of aggregated rights and responsibilities but these claims are still difficult to concretize.

During the Age of Enlightenment, it was Immanuel Kant who represented the cosmopolitan thrust in his work, particularly in his essays in *Perpetual Peace*. An interesting point from Kant is this,

“The right to present themselves to society belongs to all mankind in virtue of our common right of possession on the surface of the earth on which, as it is a globe, we cannot be infinitely scattered, and must in the end reconcile ourselves to existence side by side: at the same time, originally no one individual had more right than another to live in any one particular spot.” ⁽⁴⁾

These essays summarily pertain to Kant's universalizable slant when it comes to morality. What I read from this specific work is his attempt to concretize his own moral theories. It is almost literal in its endeavor to suggest cosmopolitan norms which stem or *should* stem from universal moral laws. If Kant lived to this day and has seen what has happened after the First World War, then he would have come to know that he almost predicted what would happen, which is that a league of nations would somehow be born from all the fighting and would try to keep it from happening again. And that if such world war would happen again, a “better” federation of nations would arise and so on and so forth. He was also not wrong in claiming that if all else fails; it is trade and commerce that would dampen the aggression, an appeal to common interests and general good business practice.

In the contemporary period, there are even more related but various cosmopolitan strands of thought. I consistently use Seyla Benhabib's distinctions⁽⁵⁾ to summarize the cosmopolitan project in terms of its philosophical streams of argumentation. These distinctions (see footnote below) fairly describe the current cosmopolitan milieu.

However, there are those who choose to differentiate the variations in terms of its *summum bonum* or ultimate good. In general, the distinctions can be seen as economic, moral, and political. Economic cosmopolitanism put forth the

importance of the global market and its potential virtue as a keeper of the peace. I would also add to this category those who argue for the equal distribution of necessities among the peoples of the world. There is also a utilitarian cosmopolitan perspective, one loosely based on one or another form of welfarism. They propose that, “the world should be (re)organized in such a way that the basic needs for human survival should be achieved by the maximum number of people.”⁽⁶⁾ Political cosmopolitanism refers to those who argue for a world state or may also refer to those who are against a federation of states. There are also those whose focus is on cosmopolitan democracy like David Held or cosmopolitan republicanism such as James Bohman.⁽⁷⁾ And finally, there is moral cosmopolitanism which ranges from Martha Nussbaum's “love of mankind” to the multiculturalists such as Will Kymlicka.

However, these distinctions seem to exist merely as devices for an initial understanding of cosmopolitanism. For example, it is difficult to delineate the line between the moral and economic ideas of Kant which did touch on trade as a proponent of peace. Another example; it seems simplistic to draw a wall between the idea of a world state and a world economy, especially if we delve into the interrelation of state and capital. Moreover, underlying all these is the appeal for a fundamental morality that sees the unity amidst the hybridity and the cultural uniqueness. Does this mean then that despite the varied approaches to the cosmopolitan agenda, there is a commonality which belies the importance of this philosophical pursuit and undermines its philosophical importance?

The Global Scene

There is something to be said about man-made institutions such as governments, laws, and economic practices attaining powers and eventually acquiring systems more prevalent, longer-lasting, and more potent than its inventors. Of course, behind such a scenario, there are players that allowed it to happen, for their own benefit and at the cost of the greater many. Like Hannah Arendt poses, the products of our work and action, such as our institutions, will persist until after we are all gone. This is also indicative of what Kojin Karatani

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claims is the staying-power of the trilogy of the capital-nation-state, which for him should be treated as a whole in this discourse. Thus it seems that in general, the cosmopolitical question is reduced to whether the mechanisms or the power of the nation-state can be bypassed. Is there a way to assign rights to individuals outside of the systems of the nation-states? This may be an oversimplification of the phenomenon and, of course, there are other factors and elements that come into play. However, though this statement does not encompass the entirety of the cosmopolitan agenda, it does give us a framework to work on.

Kojin Karatani explains that the capital-nation-state does not simply melt away when the revolution occurs.⁽⁸⁾ The revolution he is talking about, of course, is of the Marxist kind. This is because each of the fundamental machinery that was meticulously self-produced by the capital, the nation, and the state for itself *into* itself is so much more intricate and encompassing than any individual might begin to conceive. Monarchies and empires are much easier to pinpoint and be held accountable for. But the capital-nation-state system has entrenched its constituents into its fold that it is difficult to assess just how deep it implicates the lives, moods, perspectives, choices, and other human endeavors we are capable of. The focus of cosmopolitanism on humanism, that is underscoring the importance of assigning rights to individuals, is precisely an attempt to overcome this imbalance.

When Hannah Arendt talked about the “The Rights of Man, supposedly inalienable, proved to be unenforceable even in countries whose constitutions were based upon them-whenver people appeared who were no longer citizens of any sovereign state,” she is pointing out the paradox inherent in the nation-state.⁽⁹⁾ This paradox within the nation-state and Karatani’s idea on the persistence of the capital-nation state systems give rise to the issues (e.g. migrant rights, multicultural claims) crucial for the cosmopolitan thinker which goes beyond another criticism against cosmopolitanism (i.e. making archaic distinctions such as the universal and the particular).

Cosmopolitan practices of business and trade have been legislated without

raising alarms of sovereignty (Or even if there were alarms set, these were ignored) and since it has become custom, it just made sense to put it into actual, national law. Hence we have trade laws that transcend national boundaries. Kant was able to envision that this might be the road to world peace. The notion that it is possible to concretize a universal idea into actual law is a good place to begin with regards to the trajectory of the universal/cosmopolitan project. The economic, moral, and political cosmopolitan could admit (albeit grudgingly) that this is a good starting point. The second idea which helps the cosmopolitan project is the current stage of our world history, that is, the sweeping impact of globalization.

“On the one hand, the differentiating impact of globalization strengthens or reactivates national identities, communities and projections..... On the other hand, the national level of integration complements, conditions, and counteracts the global one. Within the 'world of nations', the nations have a more or less tendency to become worlds in their own right, and in this capacity, they also face the task of coming to terms with the other lines of differentiation switch (are) built into the global condition.” ⁽¹⁰⁾

It is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the effects of technology and the economic arena where we live in. It is also an overarching system that has a life of its own, at least, this is how Karatani sees it. We may attribute it to the notion of capitalism but I believe that it is so much more than that. Capitalism may have been the impetus, but it is not just the mechanism that is creating this global awareness. Case in point, environmental concerns and issues are caused by capitalist negligence. However, the effects of global warming and such are not just confined to a specific region. It is a worldwide phenomena that demands everyone's attention because its effect are, quite simply, too massive to ignore. It is not difficult to imagine then that as more natural disasters happen, the call for environmental protection should be more than just advocacies. There should be universal norms that should be put in place for

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everyone's compliance. Last November 2015, the United Nations hosted a convention on climate change which about 195 countries participated in. The objective is:

“to stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic (human induced) interference with the climate system. It states that such a level should be achieved within a time-frame sufficient to allow ecosystems to adapt naturally to climate change, to ensure that food production is not threatened, and to enable economic development to proceed in a sustainable manner.” (Nations n.d.)

Problems on peace, environmental issues, continuous problems on feminism, racism, and other disadvantaged groups or society are global issues which demand, at the very least, a look at a universal solution because the world's various multifaceted cultures and communities cannot go past their lens and hence makes it difficult for them to see the bigger picture. Of course, these various issues have nuanced and varying frameworks. To address these issues is a monumental task that needs more thorough studies and demands various academic tools. They are mentioned here only to show that all these questions have been also tackled by cosmopolitical philosophers and the common grounding is indicative of the humanism that Linklater has posited earlier on.

However, the Climate Change Convention and other such actions by the United Nations are steps in the right direction and are indicative of the cosmopolitan goal. Seyla Benhabib observes that there is “an eventual transition from a model of international law based on treaties among states to cosmopolitan law understood as international public law that binds and bends the will of sovereign nations.” (Benhabib 2006, 20)

Simply put, contemporary problems demand a change of viewpoint and attitude and so far, it is cosmopolitan morality that attempts to delve into the discourse, forced to use old methodologies for global issues that are not exactly new, but the realization that it is a universal problem is somehow new.

Conclusion

It seems there are more similarities that these strands of cosmopolitanisms share when viewed from a critical perspective. Aside from being too ideal and impractical, cosmopolitanism as a discourse has a tendency to use the same methodologies that have been used for similar socio-political issues.

“Some forms of cosmopolitanism are charged with being culturally relative, teleological, conservative, unrealistic, depolitical, ineffective, and have a limited ability to pursue social justice. More condemning critiques of cosmopolitanism contend that some cosmopolitan ideals and agendas are parasitic, elitist, Eurocentric (if not imperial), and unimaginative.”⁽¹¹⁾

The first part of the criticism above seems to coincide with the distinctions mentioned earlier. Cosmopolitans make the same criticisms to their compatriots. I believe that one of the factors underlying this charge is that cosmopolitans have to utilize the same set of medieval tools for problems whose scope we are viewing from a relatively new angle. It is only recently that we realize just how globally pervasive the issues which we should be most concerned about. How we treat the world, how we treat our women, how we treat those who are different from us: these are all matters that transcend cultures and communities, why couldn't the solution be found in the points of contentions, in the transcendent spaces where the perspective may be clearer.

Cosmopolitan Morality and its focus on humanism, which we have seen in the examples given previously, may have various strands of thought but its universality is rooted in issues that go beyond the nation-state. To conclude, the cosmopolitan thinker is a universalist of a very specific kind, the kind that recognizes not just the need for sovereign nations to be accountable for each and every individual under their constituency, but also the realization that there are certain problems that transcend the capital-nation-state. Cosmopolitanism attempts to painstakingly show that the marriage of the moral and the political as philosophical traditions have a practical application in spite of its idealistic notions. The appeal for human rights & multicultural claims and

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environmental laws are manifestations of the clamor for a universal, cosmopolitan framework. No one ever says that they do not want equal rights for all or that they are not supporters of universal justice. The problem is that no matter how reasonable or how logically sound one's arguments are, the desired consequence has never been actually attained. There will always be critics, whose thoughts are the very doubts and ideas shared by the cosmopolitans themselves plaguing their heart of hearts.

This is the background of the current cosmopolitan project. In many respects, it is different from the original Grecian concept of what is cosmopolitan. The difference is not in terms of meaning because the Greek term is still applicable but the cosmopolite of this day and age has to contend with more nuanced, more complex issues regarding identity, affiliation, and motivations in the socio-political, moral and economic landscape. So while the challenges seem to remain the same, the emancipatory intent of the various cosmopolitan discourses should be continued as well.

The moral and political agenda of the cosmopolitan project is an attempt to show that there are problems that we all share, as citizens of the world. These global issues have their specific nuances and may demand vastly different solutions but it should be a universal concern. Raising this awareness and expanding the mind may be at the heart of the cosmopolitan political thinker.

Notes:

- (1) (Linklater 2007)
- (2) (Kleingeld Fall 2014 Edition)
- (3) (Kleingeld Fall 2014 Edition)
- (4) (Kant 1795), p.138.
- (5) "For some, cosmopolitanism signifies an attitude of enlightened morality that does not place 'love of country' ahead of 'love of mankind' (Martha Nussbaum); for others, cosmopolitanism signifies hybridity, fluidity, and recognizing the fractured and internally driven character of human selves and citizens, whose complex aspirations cannot be circumscribed by national

fantasies and primordial communities (Jeremy Waldron). For a third group of thinkers, whose linkages are those of Critical Theory, cosmopolitanism is a normative philosophy for carrying the universalistic norms of discourse ethics beyond the confines of the nation-state (Juergen Habermas, David Held, and James Bohman)." (Benhabib 2006), p. 18.

(6) (Wheatley 2010) p. 52-53.

(7) (Kleingeld Fall 2014 Edition)

(8) (Karatani 2014), p.

(9) (Arendt 1979)

(10) (Arnason 1997)p. 225

(11) (Wheatley 2010)P. 80.

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