

Assessing Cosmopolitan Theory in World Politics

Written by Richard Beardsworth

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RICHARD BEARDSWORTH, MAY 27 2012

Assessing cosmopolitan theory in world politics today requires, I believe, a clear sense of historical conjuncture. The large array of academic engagements in cosmopolitan theory during the 1990s was not simply due to a visible acceleration in globalization processes (with its attendant global goods and bads).[1] Contemporary cosmopolitan moral and political thought is fundamentally liberal. Although this thought is critical of neo-liberal globalization and of liberal nationalism, cosmopolitan theory has worked well, accordingly, *within a liberal world order*. With present shifts away from Northwestern hegemony, with an emerging new world order in which liberalism is not a given, but a political project (for many, faltering), cosmopolitan theoretical engagements need to change gear and become more empirically driven in order to be persuasive. My assessment of cosmopolitan theory in world politics rehearses this historically situated argument.[2]

Although important cosmopolitan statements were made by theorists during the 1970s and 1980s[3], it is fair to argue that as a body of theory having impact on the way we think the world, cosmopolitan thought came into its own during the 1990s. There are several diverse factors involved here: from the end of the Cold War and the concomitant emergence of market globalization and a global civil society; through the triumph of liberalism, the new release of life for IGOs like the United Nations after the Cold War, and an ever-more dense international human rights regime; to important academic strategies like that of David Held and his colleagues regarding globalization processes.[4] As I have argued recently[5], there are however two major reasons why cosmopolitan theory has consolidated itself during the last twenty years: 1) technological and economic interdependence creates global phenomena that require a global framework to be understood and addressed; 2) with the triumph of liberalism, this framework has been reflected upon in cosmopolitan liberal terms (predominantly, the language of 'rights'). This is not to suggest that there are not other ways of thinking cosmopolitanism outside moral and legal liberal terms.[6] It is to suggest, however, that the predominant way to do so in the political field has been through the liberal tradition of Western political thought.[7] If this assumption is compelling, in what way does the present processes of relative decline of the Northwestern powers and the emerging power of countries like China, India, South Africa, Turkey and Brazil change the way in which cosmopolitan theory should address world politics if it wishes to have impact upon it? In other words, does the relative decline of the Northwest *increase* the importance of cosmopolitan theory (as one would intuitively think it should) or does it *decrease* its importance (because cosmopolitan *theory* is fundamentally liberal in disposition)?

This question is obviously important for globally-minded students of international relations today since it concerns our ideological disposition towards an uncertain world as well as the practices that disposition makes possible. I make five points in response to this question, which affirm a cosmopolitan agenda.

(1) The first point has been made by many scholars and intellectuals but needs to be repeated at a moment of historical change that invites relativism. Although the source of cosmopolitanism is Western, the validity of its arguments is not. If one believes, for example, in the universal agency of every individual, this argument must be made normatively. Individual agency may well have been nurtured historically through particular social and political forms, but these facts do not affect the validity of the argument as such.

(2) Both the European state-form and the language of fundamental rights have at the same time become global. Accordingly, the terms of political invention with regard to individual and collective freedom within globalizing

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processes work themselves out through these historical givens.

(3) The validity of these arguments must be rehearsed, nevertheless, through the specificities of diverse political cultures and diverse formations of civil society. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* posits the right to freedom of conscience. Cosmopolitans are correct, I believe, to hold to the universality of this right with a deontological theory of the dignity of the person in the background. How this right assumes form in non-western political cultures remains a question, however, for these cultures. It has not already been decided by the way in which it assumed form in Northwestern societies. (These societies have, that said, the cosmopolitan right to argue in the emergent global public sphere that the formal separation of religion and politics constitutes a necessary condition of the fulfillment of this right.)

(4) As the previous example of the freedom of conscience shows, there is therefore increasing structural similarity and continuing embedded difference between all nations within modernizing processes since the sixteenth century. The relations between these similarities and differences will continue to shift in predictable and unpredictable ways during the 21st century.

(5) To one side of this variation, the material conditions of an integrated world capitalist economy create an array of global problems the solution of which requires a global equivalent of domestic government. Migration and human trafficking, climate change mitigation and adaptation, global macroeconomic and financial stability, global health regulation, and regional resource-conflict (to name the socially most evident) are *all* political issues that stem from increasing dependence among states and among peoples. To address them requires political decision-making at the global level. In order to be political, this decision-making must, ultimately, be both effective and legitimate.

Taken together, all five points suggest that cosmopolitan theory *will* increase in importance in the coming decades despite the ongoing pluralization of power centers in world politics. This is an important point to make at this moment of historical change.

That said, with the shift of power away from the Northwest, cosmopolitan theory needs to change gear. Over the past twenty years there has been sophisticated debate both within cosmopolitan theory and between cosmopolitanism and communitarianism over the nature and reach of citizens' duties and responsibilities to foreigners.[8] There has been parallel debate around global distributive justice that concerns the rights and responsibilities of individuals and states in the contexts of extreme poverty and global inequality.[9] Although these debates remain normatively important, they (among other cosmopolitan theories) need to break out of their theoretical skin. In a world of pluralizing power centers—and to one side of the practical challenge of contemporary global activism (see note 1)—I would argue that the stake for cosmopolitan theory in world politics now becomes one of *appropriateness* to the empirical challenges that this world throws up. In other words, the issue is no longer one of working out cosmopolitan theory as such (in the context of globalization, extreme poverty, mass immigration, etc.), but of *re-tuning* this theory so that it can help shape empirical challenges in a globalized, but plural world. Simply put, it is no longer today a question of doing normative cosmopolitan theory as such, but of normatively shaping empirical challenges besetting the world as a whole (in the context of a pluralization of power). This conclusion suggests the following cosmopolitan strategies with regard to contemporary world politics:

- Argument for specific cosmopolitan commitments in international relations in response to specific national, regional and world problems that have global reach: for example, financial regulation, led by the G20 countries and BASEL, of bank-reserve ratios.
- Argument for specific cosmopolitan commitments within nation-states and regional entities like the EU: for example, domestic constitutionalization of national responsibility towards asylum-seekers.
- Empirically-driven research on the structural problems resisting cosmopolitan commitments so that these commitments can be re-organized in order to be feasible while retaining their ethical motivation: for example, the structural limits preventing a global legal compact on climate change mitigation and how normative cosmopolitan argument is best formulated given these limits.

These strategies are obviously not exclusive, but they do foreground two things: the need for empirically driven

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cosmopolitan theory at a moment of deep historical change and the need for cosmopolitan judgment in the emerging global public sphere. These needs are complementary. Without systematic empirical research informing normative cosmopolitan argument, the normative cosmopolitan case in world politics will not be as persuasive as it could be. Pursuing cosmopolitan theory in contemporary world politics requires, therefore, bridging the normative/empirical divide.

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[1] For a clear bibliography of such engagements, see G.W. Brown and D. Held's *Cosmopolitan Reader* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010).

[2] The argument is different to the institutional and political cosmopolitan arguments that cosmopolitan theory needs to become more practical (see, for example, T. Pogge *World Poverty and Human Rights* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002); D. Archibugi, *The Global Commonwealth of Citizens* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008); and D. Held, *Cosmopolitanism: Ideas and Realities* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010). While endorsing the above, I am arguing that cosmopolitan theory must be more empirically driven if it is to be a convincing normative perspective in a world of plural power centers.

[3] Most importantly regarding the field of world politics, see C. Beitz, *Political Theory and International Relations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979).

[4] On the last academic point, David Held's pioneering 'readers' on globalization processes have helped to give students of IR a sense of the intellectual importance of a cosmopolitan framework for world politics.

[5] See R. Beardsworth, *Cosmopolitanism and International Relations Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), 1-15.

[6] See K. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (London: Penguin, 2006) and the politically diverse articles in D. Held and L. Moore, eds., *Cultural Politics in a Global Age* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008).

[7] I understand this tradition in a wide sense that runs from the seventeenth to the twentieth century: it includes under the banner of liberalism, therefore, liberal democratic thought, republican thought and social democratic thought.

[8] For an excellent account of these debates, see R. Shapcott, *International Ethics: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010).

[9] The 'global justice' debate has been carefully brought together in G.W. Brown and D. Held's *Cosmopolitan Reader*.