

Constructing a Realistic Cosmopolitanism

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CHRIS PEYS, DEC 18 2014

The notion of 'world citizenship' is an aspect of cosmopolitanism [1] that often conjures up an image of global harmony, a picture that is framed by the belief that the world's people can act peacefully together within the *cosmopolis* – the all-encompassing community of humanity. In response to this idealistic image, critics aver that cosmopolitanism fails to account for the harsh realities of international politics, and thus they argue that this political theory is a utopian fantasy. As Catherine Lu observes,

the universalist implication of the idea of common humanity, expressed in such phrases as 'all men are brothers,' seem utopian in a world marked by fragmentation, discord and conflict ... the moral community of humankind ... does not accord with the reality of the human condition. (2000: 246)

In this sense, the bleak state of politics renders the notion of world citizenship meaningless and void of any true normative force.

With the main purpose of better understanding how cosmopolitanism transcends this utopian critique and accounts for conflict in the sphere of international politics, this article turns to the work/ideas of Hannah Arendt in order to present scholars with a more "realistic cosmopolitanism." [2] To understand more fully Arendt's cosmopolitan disposition, this article first discusses her conception of "collective responsibility". It then suggests an interpretation of "world citizenship" based upon this understanding of responsibility as well as her analytical vision of the notion of 'world'. The aim of this article is to discuss a form of world citizenship that is constructed from reality and upon the worldly state of the political, i.e. that which arises when plural people(s) come to speak and act together. This shift of perception reconceptualises the notion of world citizenship by recasting our understanding of human responsibility in collective, global terms so that all people are understood as having a responsibility for the (re)cultivation, maintenance, and reparation of the 'world'.

Before proceeding further, however, it is important to point out that Arendt did not consider herself a cosmopolitan thinker. In fact, she rejected the notion of 'world citizenship' outright when she wrote, "nobody can be a citizen of the world as he is the citizen of his country ... a citizen is by definition a citizen among citizens of a country among countries" (Arendt, 1968: 81). Rather than heed the cosmopolitan call for a world state and thus world citizenship, Arendt stressed that citizenship must be tied to the sovereign state system, for she feared that "one sovereign state ruling the whole earth ... [would be] a forbidding nightmare of tyranny ... the establishment of one sovereign world state, far from being the prerequisite for world citizenship, would be the end of all citizenship" (Arendt, 1968: 81-82). Because a world state would eliminate the plurality [3] necessary for politics, Arendt argued that world citizenship would destroy the political itself by subsuming all people(s) under one global flag, one nation that encompasses all the Earth. Thus, a world state would embody a form of apolitical worldlessness that arises when there is no longer a plurality of perspectives to facilitate the re-creation of the world (her notions of 'world' and 'worldlessness' will be discussed in greater detail below). Accordingly, Arendt's conception of the international sphere, if it is to remain a space for political speech and action, requires a plurality of states and not a singular world government.

Having acknowledged this standpoint, the question becomes: can one use Arendt's work to construct a cosmopolitan understanding when she so strongly rejects the notion of world citizenship? This article follows the lead of both Patrick Hayden and Robert Fine, two scholars whose work focuses on the cosmopolitan nature of Arendt's ideas,

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answering affirmatively to this question. According to both Hayden and Fine, Arendt's political theory exhibits a strong cosmopolitan sensibility not through its adherence to a dogmatic reading of classical cosmopolitanism, but rather, "it is a sensibility conditioned by an uncompromising willingness to face up to the moral and political horrors of modern life, the 'dark times' of political evil that shake our sense of reality and threaten our capacity for judgement, responsibility and action" (Hayden, 2010: 10). Here, an Arendtian cosmopolitan realism is constructed upon her investigations on/around totalitarianism, "the banality of evil" (Arendt, 1977: 252) and the forces of destruction that destroyed the "world" during the 20th century. This departure point for political thought, and theorizing, counteracts utopian criticisms by showing how Arendt's "investigations into the *actuality* of crimes against humanity and the construction of an anti-totalitarian politics ... provides a [more viable] starting point" from which to understand cosmopolitanism (Fine, 2007: 97). In the wake of the atrocities committed by the Nazis and Stalin's Soviet Union, Arendt recognized that "hell is no longer a religious belief or a fantasy, but something as real as a house and stones and trees" (Arendt, 1994a: 111). Resultantly, her political theory accounts for evil in a way that all humanity is called upon to become collectively responsible for the horrors that people(s) are capable of producing.

Collectively Facing Up to Evil: Arendt's Notion of 'Collective Responsibility'

In order to more fully understand Arendt's position as a cosmopolitan theorist, however, one must look closely at her notion of 'collective responsibility,' a conception that is founded on the belief that "taking upon ourselves the consequences of things we are entirely innocent of, is the price we pay for the fact that we live our lives not by ourselves but among our fellow men" (Arendt, 2003: 157-158). For her, collective responsibility is not equivalent to individual moral and legal responsibility; rather, collective responsibility stems specifically from 'belonging' in communities (Herzog, 2014) and from being present as an actor within the "realm of human affairs ... [that] which exists wherever [people] live together" (Arendt, 1958: 183-184). Although Arendt strongly and repeatedly affirms that responsibility is *not* the same as being collectively guilty, [4] she argues that because people are born into the "web of human relationships," they are, "by virtue of being born into the historical continuum ... burdened [with] the sins of [their] fathers as [they] are blessed with the deeds of [their] ancestors" (Arendt, 2003: 27). Thus, by being born on Earth within socio-political communities to parents who are themselves children to parents (and so on and so forth), one is, in conjunction with one's fellows, collectively responsible for the 'realm of human affairs' that both antedates and postdates one's existence. In short, the human predicament of genesis within human community and living within the meta-narrative of human history generates a form of responsibility that is collectively shared between all people(s).

Furthermore, Arendt's conception of collective responsibility is expanded by the state of 'world unity' (to borrow Karl Jaspers' phrase) that reached a point of culmination in the 20th century. For her, this period of human history transformed the notion of collective responsibility into a burden that all humankind must bear, for "every country has become the almost immediate neighbour of every other country [so that] every man feels the shock of events [that] take place at the other side of the globe" (Arendt, 1968: 83). Following the work/ideas of her long-time friend and intellectual counterpart, Karl Jaspers, Arendt understands that technology and global communication have created

the essential fact [that] there is no longer anything outside. The world is closed. The unity of the earth has arrived. New perils and new opportunities [have been] revealed. All the crucial problems have become world problems, the situation, a situation of mankind. (Jaspers, 1968: 127)

This state of world unity, when coupled with Arendt's conception of collective responsibility, provides the theoretical backbone for a non-utopian cosmopolitan framework by globalizing one's responsibility to others and the world shared with others. In short, it is a cosmopolitanism that more fully accounts for "fragmentation, discord, and conflict" (Lu, 2000: 246) in international politics by taking seriously the recognition "that in one form or another, men must assume responsibility for all crimes committed by men and that all nations [must] share the onus of evil committed by all others" (Arendt, 1994: 131). Instead of basing human solidarity on some form of abstract brotherhood under the *cosmopolis*, Arendt's work stresses that we all share the world and that we must collectively take responsibility for it and those evils that seek to destroy it.

The 'World', 'Worldlessness', and World Citizenship

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Shifting away from the discussion of collective responsibility, I would now like to engage another aspect of Arendt's work, her conception of 'world.' For Arendt, the 'world' is not simply analogous to the planet Earth; rather, she understands there to be a divergence between the Earth and the world in such a way that "human beings live on earth, but dwell in the world" (Kattago, 2104: 59). As Arendt writes in *The Human Condition*:

[The world] is related ... to the human artefact, the fabrication of human hands, as well as to affairs which go on among those who inhabit the man-made world together. To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time. (Arendt, 1958: 52)

In other words, the world has a dual character in that 'human artefacts' are 'worldly' due to the fact that they constitute something which is 'inter-esse' ('between men'), that relates and binds them together but also that the 'acting and speaking' itself create the world (Arendt, 1958: 182-183). Unlike human artefacts such as monuments, works of art, books, etc., "the process of acting and speaking can leave behind no such results and end products ... [but] for all its intangibility, this in-between is no less real ... we call this reality the 'web' of human relations" (Arendt, 1958: 183). Consequently, the 'world' corresponds to that which is developed through the work of human hands and the coming together of people, as if they have come together at a table. That is, the 'world' is the common, public space of appearance that emerges when people come together in speech and action.

Although the "world" that is associated with the 'web of human relations' is no less real than the world/ness of a human artefact, the great danger that Arendt identifies with regard to this concept is the 'loss of the world,' or 'world/essness.' In opposition to world/ness, the notion of world/essness corresponds to the state in which the common space no longer exists and people are "thrown back upon [themselves], concentrate[ing] upon nothing but [themselves]" (Arendt, 1958: 115). For Arendt, a worldless state is one where the web that links people together no longer exists, and people are but individuals who exist in an alienated state of (egoistic) loneliness. Where Arendt's "concept of world captures the centrality of the world over the self and the sentiment that one should not run away from the world, but cherish and preserve it" (Kattago, 2014: 52), a state of worldlessness is one in which people have turned away (or been forced to turn away due to structural violence or totalitarian systems of government) from other people. This turning away of course impedes, prevents, or eliminates the development of a common world that develops when people speak and act together.

In terms of this article's attempt to overcome the utopian critique of cosmopolitanism, this notion of worldlessness is most important, for a non-utopian cosmopolitanism is one that accounts for those forces that destroy the 'world'. That is, a realistic cosmopolitanism is one that is directly concerned with the common world between people and is a theoretical framework devoted to renewing the world when worldlessness has set in. For Arendt, worldlessness developed in the contemporary period as a result of what she describes as the "rise of the social" alongside mass society (Arendt, 1958) and totalitarianism (see Arendt, 1951). However, this article contends that we can also apply this mode of thinking about the 'world' to international politics and those forces of "fragmentation, discord and conflict" (Lu, 2000: 246) that plague this space. In this sense, worldlessness arises frequently in the international political realm where socio-political breakdowns, wars, ethnic tensions, long-standing rivalries, and various forms of power politics have produced worldless states of alienation whereby people(s) act without regard for others (or the world shared with others). This isolation is problematic, for "alienation from the world leads to the rejection of everything that is shared in common" (Kattago, 2014: 58). In a period of human history characterized by its 'unity,' this alienation manifests worldlessness in a way that is unproductive, pernicious, and standing in the way of greater global cohesion and the collective overcoming of shared, transnational problems – i.e. climate change, terrorism, economic disaster, the AIDS/HIV epidemic, human trafficking, and an abundance of other issues. In sum, the contemporary period of history, a period where the burden of multiple evils is shared collectively and all people(s) are neighbours in a closed system, requires greater attention to that which is held common – that is, the world.

From this perspective, a 'citizen of the world' does not shy away from his or her responsibility to the global collective, but rather assumes responsibility for those people(s), things, and forces that eliminate the world. This remit is intentionally broad in order to leave room to account for the plethora of forces and forms that (will) lead to worldlessness – whether they are totalitarian systems that eliminate human plurality (Arendt, 1951), capitalistic

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systems that make people(s) superfluous (Hayden, 2010), statelessness (Hayden, 2010), or conflicts that drive people(s) apart. Furthermore, the conception of world citizenship put forward here is unbanded and suggests that there should be a plurality of approaches for taking collective responsibility for the renewal of the world in the wake of worldlessness. Pinning down one solution or arguing that there is only one way of properly taking responsibility for the world is ultimately an unworldly thing to do (as it eliminates plurality); thus, this article simply suggests that the 'world' must be cared for by the cosmopolitan argument. In accounting for the common space of appearance, a reconceptualized understanding of world citizenship can overcome the utopian critique by taking seriously the notion of collective responsibility. It accomplishes this task by proactively facing up to the harsh realities that humans produce. Rather than fall back on abstract notions of cosmopolitan solidarity, an Arendtian reconceptualization of world citizenship is derived from belonging in the 'world' with others and argues that one's automatic positioning in the greater meta-narrative of human history generates the responsibility for all people(s) to address those evils and forces that foster "fragmentation, discord and conflict" (Lu, 2000: 246). Peg Birmingham summarizes this final point well, writing: "the international solidarity of humanity lies in this almost unbearable burden of global political responsibility; it is a solidarity rooted in facing up to the human capacity for evil" (2006: 7). Here, solidarity is not found in the abstract, but rather based upon the fact that humanity can, and has already, proven to be capable of "world" ending atrocity and evil.

Despite the fact that one might argue that it is idealistic to think that scholars will ever agree on this conception of cosmopolitan realism (let alone embrace it in practice), it is nevertheless important to consider an alternative conception of this theory that more fully appreciates the very real struggles of international political life. Consequently, this discussion has highlighted how Arendt's ideas about collective responsibility and 'the world' shift the conceptual starting point for the cosmopolitan argument away from utopianism by asserting that the relationships between people(s) and those forces that disintegrate these relationships ought to be the baseline from which the idea of 'world citizenship' is grounded. Rather than pondering and working towards an overly idealistic understanding of cosmopolitanism, an Arendtian cosmopolitanism recognizes and emphasizes the human capacity for evil and the horrors that modernity has produced. Thus, world citizenship is not based upon a utopian fantasy. Instead, world citizenship begins from the recognition that all people come from and exist within communities, and thus are required to undertake the complex, frightening, and burdensome work of maintaining, protecting, and renewing the world with others. This means facing up to and taking responsibility for those forces and factors that drive people(s) apart – that is, addressing worldlessness and the "fragmentation, discord and conflict" (Lu, 2000: 246) that create it. From this perspective, cosmopolitanism does not run from or ignore conflict. Rather, cosmopolitanism can be seen as being founded upon it.

Notes

[1] Although cosmopolitanism is defined and debated from a wide variety of perspectives, it is widely accepted by scholars that this theory "maintains that there are moral obligations owed to all human beings based solely on their humanity alone, without reference to race, gender, nationality, ethnicity, culture, religion, political affiliation, state citizenship or other particularities" (Brown and Held, 2010: 1).

[2] This article builds largely on the literature around what Patrick Hayden terms "cosmopolitan realism" and what Robert Fine calls "worldly cosmopolitanism." Both these scholars engages the work of Arendt, for her ideas provide a less idealistic, utopian conception of cosmopolitanism that was constructed in the wake of the Holocaust and totalitarianism.

[3] In *The Human Condition* (1958), Arendt states that "plurality is specifically *the* condition – not only *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam* – of all political life ... [it] is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives or will live" (pp. 7 – 8).

[4] As she writes in *Responsibility and Judgment*, "morally speaking, it is as wrong to feel guilty without having done anything specific as it is to feel free of all guilt if one actually is guilty of something ... there is no such thing as collective guilt or collective innocence; guilt and innocence make sense only if applied to individuals" (2003: 28-29).

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