

# The Possibility of a Cosmopolitan World Order: An Optimistic View of History

Written by Nathan Olsen

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## The Possibility of a Cosmopolitan World Order: An Optimistic View of History

<https://www.e-ir.info/2017/12/09/the-possibility-of-a-cosmopolitan-world-order-an-optimistic-view-of-history/>

NATHAN OLSEN, DEC 9 2017

This essay will argue that a cosmopolitan world order is possible, and necessary, for citizens and states of the international space, and fundamentally, that such an institution would be able to overcome the anarchical nature of international politics and the practical problems that derive from it, which initially appear unyielding. The seemingly idealistic notion of a cosmopolitan world order has gained a certain amount of credibility due to the commendable work of theorists such as Held and Archibugi (1995), and scholars like Beardsworth (2011) have also furthered the development of cosmopolitan ideas. This essay will view the objections of Kennan (1985), Nowicka and Kaweh (2009), Nagel (2010) and Dahl (1999) – namely that morality doesn't impact international relations, that the UN is a sufficiently cosmopolitan institution, that a cosmopolitan world order cannot exist because of a lack of sovereignty, and that a cosmopolitan world order cannot be democratic – as important but ultimately failing criticisms of cosmopolitanism. Many criticisms of cosmopolitanism derive from the realist tradition, either directly as shown by Kennan's rejection of morality (1985) or indirectly, as shown by Nagel's (2010) assumption of an international space defined by anarchy. Therefore, this essay can be seen broadly as a critical discussion between cosmopolitan and realist thought. However, this does not mean that liberal scholars, like Weiss (2010), or even scholars from outside of the international relations discipline such as Dahl, an eminent political scientist, should be ignored. Rather, it is the case that this breadth of argument allows us to explore further the argument for the existence of a cosmopolitan world order than would otherwise be possible. Through a thorough examination of anti-cosmopolitan arguments, then, it will be shown that a cosmopolitan world order is possible, that it is ethically necessary and that it must be pursued precisely and carefully, otherwise it may result in more harm than good. As Lu (2000, p.10) writes,

“when properly understood...ethical perspectives can be enlisted to aid the betterment of the human condition, but when ill-conceived, they go wrong in various ways that unleash different but equally devastating plagues on humanity”.

### Defining Cosmopolitanism

To assess the possibility of a cosmopolitan world order, it must first be established exactly what cosmopolitanism is. There is a broad consensus amongst cosmopolitan theorists regarding the ethical foundations of cosmopolitanism – namely, a focus on the ideas of individualism, egalitarianism and universalism. As Charvet (1998, p.524) defines it, moral cosmopolitanism “is an ideal moral order that applies universally and in which individual human beings are immediately members”. Institutional order, on the other hand, does not necessarily involve an overarching structure of governance, but rather some combination of institutions that serve humanity. There is, however, much disagreement on the issue of how to apply the values of cosmopolitanism in concrete terms. Considering types of cosmopolitanism, Brock (2013, p.3) states that “there is disagreement about what cosmopolitanism requires at the institutional level” as theorists are often concerned about the centralisation of power in the international space and the consequences of abusing such power. Yet, Brock also suggests “there are various possibilities for global governance that would not amount to a world state”. This essay will defend a conception of cosmopolitan world order Copp (2005, p.50) imagines as a “quasi-state that could discharge [the] global society's duty”. Such an institution would fall on the stronger end of the cosmopolitan spectrum, as global problems require more than humanitarian intervention, and in the language of Archibugi (2008, p.3) would constitute “cosmopolitan democracy”. A broad

# **The Possibility of a Cosmopolitan World Order: An Optimistic View of History**

Written by Nathan Olsen

definition of cosmopolitan democracy as offered by Beardsworth (2011, p.42) is as follows: “the invention of new institutional forms of democratic accountability and transparency and the ‘locking-in’ of supranational models of governance with national models of government”. Only through this type of institution, I will argue, can global justice be achieved without losing democratic structure, and therefore, this is the ideal type of cosmopolitan world order.

However, prior to establishing the possibility of a cosmopolitan world order, one must consider whether normative theories – such as cosmopolitanism – should even have an influence on international relations. It will become clear that normative theory, and ethics broadly speaking, has much to offer the study of international relations; yet, we must countenance the arguments put forward by eminent scholars who state that morality has no place in the relations between states.

## **Morality in International Relations**

Kennan (1985), a prominent critic of America’s moralistic post-war foreign policy, states that “in a less than perfect world... it is natural that the avoidance of the worst should often be a more practical undertaking than the achievement of the best”. The realist argument, then, is that states should focus on preventing political crises rather than constructing ethically-based institutions in pursuit of long-term moral goals. This line of thought places Kennan firmly in the sceptical camp regarding whether states consider moral concerns when devising foreign policy. However, the above argument is subject to much criticism from realists and non-realists alike. Carr (1946, p.235) – an important theorist in the lineage of realism – makes the crucial point that “it is an unreal kind of realism which ignores the element of morality in any world order”, while Donnelly (2013, p. 50) – writing from a constructivist perspective – argues that it is evident that “just as individuals may behave morally in the absence of government enforcement of moral rules, states often can and do act out of moral concerns”. These examples show that both positivist and post-positivist theorists regard morality as an important factor in international relations. From a broadly positivist view, it can be argued that morals do affect relations between states; from a post-positivist view, many normative theorists and constructivists argue that ethical concerns should and do play an important role in international relations. It would then seem that morality, whether it should or not, does play a role in international relations; now we must consider whether a cosmopolitan world order – an inherently moral global institution – is possible in the future of world politics.

## **Failure of Existing Institutions to Bring About Global Justice**

Academics, particularly liberal internationalists such as Weiss (2010), have argued that international institutions – especially the United Nations – already act as moral leaders in policy and ideas. Even Archibugi (2008), a cosmopolitan critic of the UN, suggests that the reasoning behind creating the United Nations (UN) was inherently cosmopolitan, due to its focus on universal human rights and its wider ethos of egalitarianism. Nowicka and Kaweh (2009) further this idea of the UN, as they argue for the almost universally cosmopolitan attitude of UN agencies and the employees who work for them. However, Held (1995, p.105) powerfully undermines this perception of the UN; regarding the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, the bias towards powerful nation-states in the UN Charter and the scope of peacekeeping missions, Held writes that “the UN Charter model...failed effectively to generate a new principle of organization in the international order”. Having removed any hope that the UN might act as some sort of basis for a global cosmopolitan order, Held then argues that the nation-state alone is ineffective and inadequate for the increasingly interdependent world we inhabit. If we follow Held’s argument, that leaves new forms of international governance (without completely disregarding the nation-state) as the only viable solution to the problems caused by globalization and the existential issue of climate change. This seems highly unlikely yet, as Held himself proclaims, history – particularly that of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century – has shown that unlikely processes and events can happen; thus, there is an optimistic case for the possibility of a cosmopolitan world order.

The UN, as argued above, fails to combat global injustice and inequality effectively. However, this does not mean that there is no evidence of the beginnings of a cosmopolitan world order in the real world. As Kaldor (2003, p.583) writes, “the global system is increasingly composed of layers of political institutions, individuals, groups and even companies, as well as states and international institutions”. Other cosmopolitan thinkers further this with Pogge (1998) emphasising the importance and influence of human rights groups and the institutions that promote human

# The Possibility of a Cosmopolitan World Order: An Optimistic View of History

Written by Nathan Olsen

rights, while Beitz (1998) argues that the European Union is a strong example of economic interdependence, which could be gradually changed so that it works more towards global justice than neoliberal economics. Cosmopolitans, therefore, can view some existing institutions as either viable components of a democratic world order or, more likely, as existing frameworks which need deep reform, but would provide necessary organisational structure for global governance. Thus, there is not only theoretical support for a cosmopolitan world order but also empirical evidence that supranational governance can and does work.

## Overcoming Anarchy, The Domestic Analogy and Its Consequences

It has been shown thus far that morality has a place in world politics and that existing institutions, at supranational and national levels, indicate the beginnings of a cosmopolitan world order even though said institutions have failed so far to effectively respond to global issues. Yet surely it is not as simple to construct a cosmopolitan world order as optimists such as Held argue. Nagel (2010), in his seminal work 'The Problem of Global Justice', presents some difficult challenges to the cosmopolitan panacea of global governance. Therefore, if the case for the possibility of a cosmopolitan world order is to be shown, Nagel's objections to the idea must be outlined and answered. Firstly, Nagel (2010, p. 494) writes that "actual justice cannot be achieved except within a sovereign state". This Hobbesian[1] statement causes a sizeable problem for global justice, and therefore any cosmopolitan institution, as there is no sovereign power in international politics. As anarchy is the prevailing feature of the international system, according to realist thought, even the idea of a sovereign power seems impossible. Nagel (2010, p. 503) continues, writing that justice can be achieved quite easily, in theory, within sovereign states operating internationally. This, however, would lead to a collection of individually sovereign and just states, rather than justice on a truly global scale: "[global justice] cannot be reached by extending to the international case the principles of domestic justice". As a consequence, cosmopolitans must reject this state-based conception of justice precisely because it is an inadequate response to the global problems the world is facing.

The objections Nagel raises to the possibility of global justice and a world order based on cosmopolitan values pose a strong challenge to the practicality of implementing cosmopolitan ideals in a concrete form. However, Nagel's criticisms do not derail the cosmopolitan cause but rather force cosmopolitans and those who seek to realize global justice to examine their own case more closely. Beardsworth (2011) replies with the same scrutiny that Nagel brings to the issue of global justice in his initial argument. In his treatise 'Cosmopolitanism and International Relations Theory', Beardsworth (2011) challenges the theoretical foundations of realist thought and in doing so provides a compelling argument against said foundations which, in Nagel's view, made the idea of a cosmopolitan world order impossible. These foundations are as follows: the international system is in a perpetual state of anarchy which cannot be overcome; the state of anarchy cannot be overcome because there is no sovereign to bring about order. Beardsworth (2011, p.91-92) disputes the latter of these two statements, stating that realist argument "is grounded on the simple assumption that world government requires the same coercive force as that of domestic law" whereas it is the case that "the relation between law and force can change from one level of human organization to another because of the historical internalization of external constraint". From a cosmopolitan perspective, then, the 'domestic analogy' used by realists to emphasise the problem of anarchy and sovereignty is simply not representative of how international politics works.

This deconstruction of system-level variables in the realist perception of the international system is important to the viability of a cosmopolitan world order because if sovereignty can be achieved in international politics, then the idea of a cosmopolitan world order is a realistic one. Beardsworth recognises that his argument, just like the realist view, is based on an assumption; however, the assumption that international politics works fundamentally differently to domestic politics is a vital explanatory factor. As Beardsworth (2011, p.92) writes, "without this assumption, one cannot explain why conflicts in the world...remain an exception in a fairly stable world order". Having shown that the underlying assumptions behind Nagel's anti-cosmopolitan argument are weak premises, it must be recognised that the argument he draws from said premises is subsequently cast into a great deal of doubt. The issue of sovereignty in the international space is found to be, therefore, not an issue. Consequently, the possibility of a cosmopolitan world order seems increasingly evident. We must, however, consider other criticisms of cosmopolitanism before concluding that a cosmopolitan world order is indeed possible.

# The Possibility of a Cosmopolitan World Order: An Optimistic View of History

Written by Nathan Olsen

## The Possibility of Democracy in Supranational Institutions

Anti-cosmopolitan thinkers argue that even if some form of global governance would at least go some way to ensuring global justice, such a system would be fundamentally undemocratic. Thus, the argument goes, we should settle for existing democratic nation-states rather than pursuing global justice via undemocratic means. Dahl (2010, p.431) argues that “international organizations are not and are not likely to be democratic”, having highlighted the key problem of supranational democracy: that “among a large group of persons with varied and conflicting ends, goals, interests and purposes, unanimity is unattainable, disagreement on...policy is to be expected and civic virtue is too weak...to override individual and group interests”. An undemocratic world order would work but a democratic institution wouldn't, in the view of sceptics such as Dahl. However, as set out earlier, the very conception of a cosmopolitan world order this essay defends is a cosmopolitan democracy. Therefore, the idea of international organizations as fundamentally undemocratic must be challenged by an equally strong cosmopolitan argument. Bonanate (1995), Falk (1995) and Frith (2008) offer particularly compelling counter-arguments against the scepticism of anti-cosmopolitan thought concerning democracy on a global scale. The argument Bonanate (1995, p.43) presents states that “the contemporary international system is littered with procedures and rules based increasingly on a concert of subjects representing a number of other states”, and furthermore, that “it no longer seems rash for states to sit down together and discuss distributive justice on a social and global plane”. This argument shows us that, compared to, say, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the prospects for a democratic world order are now positive and in some cases, supranational governance already exists in a democratic form.

Falk (1995, p.164) goes even further, arguing that “world order is a composite reality” consisting of global security networks, institutions encouraging economic interdependence and transnational organizations providing humanitarian aid. Falk, then, shows us that not only is a democratic cosmopolitan world order possible but that one already exists, albeit in currently fragmented components. His argument concludes in much the same vein as Held's earlier argument (1995), as Falk (1995, p.179) proclaims that “neither pessimism nor optimism can be validated given existing levels of knowledge, making the pursuit of the vision that corresponds to our values the most sensible course of action”. The “vision” he conjures is that of a cosmopolitan world order. Frith (2008, p. 218) adds to the case for a democratic cosmopolitanism as he provides us with an example of cosmopolitan democracy in action, in the form of “the EU gender equality regime”. Frith argues that the European Court of Justice (ECJ) is a concrete example of cosmopolitan judgement and law-making, and not only regarding gender; Frith writes that “other issue areas such as environmental policy or social policy arguably display similar trajectories”.

Falk, Frith and Bonanate's arguments point to concrete evidence that, contra Dahl, international organizations can be democratic. The arguments offered then build from this evidence to conclusions of varying optimism in favour of a democratic, cosmopolitan world order. Bonanate simply states the possibility of the idea whilst Falk concludes that such a form of global governance is realizable and that we must act to realize it. Frith demonstrates the beginning of said realization by showing us the ECJ's cosmopolitan nature. Therefore, regarding the issue of whether a cosmopolitan world order would be democratic, it has been shown that cosmopolitan optimists have a stronger argument than anti-cosmopolitan sceptics.

## Conclusion

This essay has shown that a cosmopolitan world order is possible and, furthermore, that such an institution can be achieved in a democratic manner. Criticisms offered by anti-cosmopolitan thinkers, both realist scholars and sceptics of other schools, have failed to depict global governance as inherently idealistic or evidently unachievable. Instead, it is the case that such arguments have merely helped to define exactly how a cosmopolitan world order should be: a democratic, gradually implemented form of supranational governance that works alongside the nation-state rather than in its place. The scholarship of Archibugi, Held and Beardsworth has provided the cosmopolitan cause with optimistic and realistic arguments in their favour. In contrast, the arguments of Kennan, Nagel and Dahl succeeded only in offering a sceptical, pessimistic view of the world. Optimists about the UN, such as Weiss, Nowicka and Kaweh, are simply mistaken about the cosmopolitan nature of the institution. However, this lack of existing fully-formed cosmopolitan institutions does not deny the possibility of a cosmopolitan world order in the future, as this essay has showed. Rather, it has been demonstrated that a cosmopolitan world order is indeed possible, and

# The Possibility of a Cosmopolitan World Order: An Optimistic View of History

Written by Nathan Olsen

necessary, if we are to act on the issues humanity faces in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

## Bibliography

Archibugi, D. 2008. *The global commonwealth of citizens: toward cosmopolitan democracy*. Princeton University Press.

Bonanate, L. 1995. 'Peace or Democracy?' in Archibugi, D. and Held, D. (Eds): *Cosmopolitan Democracy: An Agenda for a New World Order*. pp. 42-68.

Beardsworth, R. 2011. *Cosmopolitanism and international relations theory*. Polity Press, Cambridge.

Beitz, C. 1994. "Cosmopolitan Liberalism and the State System" in C. Brown (Ed): *Political restructuring in Europe: ethical perspectives*. Routledge: London. pp. 119-133.

Brock, G. 2013. 'Rethinking the Cosmopolitanism versus Non-Cosmopolitanism Debate: An Introduction' in Brock, G (Eds): *Cosmopolitanism versus Non-Cosmopolitanism: Critiques, Defenses, Reconceptualizations*. Oxford University Press.

Carr, E.H. 1939. *"The Twenty Years' Crisis 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations"*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Charvet, J. 1998. "The Possibility of a Cosmopolitan Order Based on the Idea of Universal Human Rights". *Millennium*, Volume 27, Issue 3. pp.523 - 541.

Copp, D. 2005. "International Justice and the Basic Needs Principle" in Brock, G. (Eds): *The Political Philosophy of Cosmopolitanism*. Cambridge University Press. pp.39-54.

Dahl, R. 2010. 'Can International Organizations Be Democratic? A Skeptic's View' in Brown, G.W. and Held, D. (Eds): *The Cosmopolitan Reader*. pp. 423-434.

Donnelly, J. 2013. 'Realism', in Burchill, S. and Linklater, A. (Eds), *Theories of International Relations*. Palgrave. pp. 32-57.

Falk, R. 1995. 'The World Order between Inter-State Law and the Law of Humanity: the Role of Civil Society Institutions' in Archibugi, D. and Held, D. (Eds): *Cosmopolitan Democracy: An Agenda for a New World Order*. pp. 163-180.

Frith, R. 2008. "Cosmopolitan Democracy and the EU: The Case of Gender". *Political Studies*. Volume 56, Issue 1. pp. 215-236.

Held, D. 1995. *Democracy and the International Order* in Archibugi, D. and Held, D. (Eds): *Cosmopolitan Democracy: An Agenda for a New World Order*. pp. 96-117.

Kaldor, M. 2003. "The Idea of Global Civil Society". *International Affairs*. Volume 79, No. 3. pp. 583-593.

Kennan, G.F. 1985. 'Morality and Foreign Policy'. *Foreign Affairs*. Volume 64, Issue 2. pp. 205-218.

Lu, C. 2000. "The One and Many Faces of Cosmopolitanism". *The Journal of Political Philosophy*. Volume 8, No. 2.

Nagel, T. 2010. 'The Problem of Global Justice' in Brown, G. and Held, D (Eds): *The Cosmopolitan Reader*. Polity. pp. 493-513.

# **The Possibility of a Cosmopolitan World Order: An Optimistic View of History**

Written by Nathan Olsen

Nowicka, M. and Kaweh, R. 2009. *"Looking at the Practice of UN Professionals: Strategies for Managing Differences and the Emergence of a Cosmopolitan Identity"*. *Cosmopolitanism in Practice*. pp. 76-105.

Pogge, T. 1994. *"Cosmopolitanism and Sovereignty"* in C. Brown (Ed): *Political restructuring in Europe: ethical perspectives*. Routledge: London. pp. 85-119.

Weiss, T. 2010. *How United Nations Ideas Change History*. *Review of International Studies*. Volume 36, No. 1. pp. 3-23.

## **Notes**

[1] 'Hobbesian' in this sense refers to the notion that without a sovereign power, law cannot be enforced and thus, legitimacy of power is called into question. This sentiment, extended to the idea of justice, underlies the opening section of Nagel's article 'The Problem of Global Justice'.

*Written by: Nathan Olsen*

*Written at: University of Leeds*

*Written for: Hugh Dyer*

*Date written: November 2017*