

# Cosmopolitanism as a Political Theory

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The word “cosmopolitanism” comes from the Greek language and it signifies the concept of global citizenship; the idea that all people are citizens of the world, and therefore have a responsibility towards every other person living on it. “[It] originate(d) with the Stoics, whose idea (...) neatly captures the two main aspects of cosmopolitanism: that it entails a thesis about identity and (...) a thesis about responsibility” (Scheffler 1999, 189). This concept is unsurprisingly subject of debate and disagreement in the intellectual environment; particularly when it comes to determining the extent of the responsibility people have towards others, and when applied to politics, the reach global institutions ought to have in order to implement an effective “cosmopolitan” international relations system. Initially, the cosmopolitan ideology was merely philosophical and had no ties to politics at all; it simply characterized an attitude of tolerance and respect towards those who are different (pluralism) and acceptance of the responsibility we, humans, have to every other human being regardless of their nation of citizenship, cultural identity or even physical proximity. The philosophical concept of cosmopolitanism challenges the idea of nationalism to its core since it implies people do not have any more responsibilities to their compatriots than they do to everyone else; defying the notion of a dominant national identity with the idea of a dominant human identity.

Heavily nationalist attitudes were adopted in the 1980s by newly created Eastern European countries after the fall of the Soviet Union redefining themselves independent and challenging of their formerly communist regimes, as well as by Western European countries as a reaction to massive immigration waves from Eastern European and Muslim nations. Simultaneously, though, the world faced the emergence of globalization (particularly in the West) due to technological innovations and internal improvements that facilitated movement and communication. The development of globalization occurred at a relatively rapid pace, and with

it, globalization brought a whole new series of cultural and political issues. John Rawls' "A Theory of Justice" was written in 1971, and it is the earliest -and arguably most influential- piece of work on models of distributive principles; it presents two principles of justice: First, that each person's liberty must be comparable with and compatible to the extent of liberty of others, and second, that inequalities must be of benefit to the less-fortunate communities in that society and that everyone must have the equal opportunity to hold public office and represent their people. In 1992 he published "The Law of Peoples", where he applied his initial theory to emerging questions regarding international moral relationships. He argued for a respectful and supporting dynamic between governments rather than one of common (transnational) application of values and standards of justice. He believed that "liberal democratic regimes have an obligation to deal with illiberal decent hierarchical regimes as equals, and not to endeavor to impose their values (...)" (Brock & Brighouse 2005, 2). Even though Rawls' approach was rather conservative, the ideas he put forward undoubtedly sparked the conversation on political cosmopolitanism in the intellectual and philosophical arenas.

Author Kimberly Hutchings accurately describes political cosmopolitanism as "any position which prescribes types of political practice and institution that operate over, above, or across the boundaries of the nation-state and which are at least potentially global in their reach" (Hutchings 1999, 153-154). The fact that she specifies that these political practices and institutions have only *potential* and not definite reach is key and absolutely critical to this essay; political cosmopolitanism, unlike most political theories, does not have a concrete description or parameters of action and has a very wide range of interpretations. However, even though many cosmopolitan thinkers differ in the extent of the moral responsibility individual states have towards other states, most -if not all- of them agree on the conception that "all societies have

some global responsibilities” (Brock & Brighouse 2005, 3). Like Rawls, philosopher and author Thomas Nagel advocates for the issues of justice to be left to the individual states approving only of the slightest humanitarian obligations to other states, but is still considered a cosmopolitan thinker because he does conceive of the existence of some humanitarian duties.

Many cosmopolitan thinkers consider the importance of political boundaries and national sovereignty in regards to cosmopolitanism differently. To theorists such as David Held, an effective form of cosmopolitanism would take away the exclusive domain of governance from individual states, meaning that “states need to be articulated with, and relocated within, an overreaching cosmopolitan framework” (Brock & Brighouse 2005, 26). David Held, on the other hand, believes that all political bodies ought to comply with universal principles of justice set by supranational governmental entities -whichever those entities may be. This view, contrary to Rawls and Nagel’s view, is rather liberal and can certainly be associated with “strong cosmopolitanism”. Authors Gillian Brock and Harry Brighouse categorize different types of cosmopolitanism under the terms “weak” and “strong”: “Weak cosmopolitanism just says that there are some extra-national obligations that have some moral weight. Strong cosmopolitanism, by contrast, claims that, at the most fundamental level, there are no society-wide principles of distributive justice that are not also global principles of distributive justice; and that our fellow nationals not only have no claim on us, but we have no right to use nationality (...) as a trigger for our discretionary behavior” (Brock & Brighouse 2005, 3).

“What political cosmopolitanism seeks to establish is a transnational system of institutions that promote and protect what moral cosmopolitans see as fundamental human rights, such as democratic governance, freedom of speech, expression and religion, freedom of unprovoked aggression. (...) The international order that cosmopolitans strive for is therefore

simply defined as a secular network of global institutions that strive to establish norms of behavior throughout the international system, based on western concepts of human rights and representative governance” (Howarth 2013).” The International Criminal Court (ICC), the World Health Organization (WHO), and arguably United Nations are examples of cosmopolitan political structures functioning today. The ICC, for instance, has almost absolute global reach and its purpose is to implement and enforce regulations on behavior during war for any nation involved in any conflict, including only internal conflicts. The United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a more precise example; the UN used its power and influence to incentivize member states of the United Nations to standardize and comply with the principles of justice put forward in the declaration. The main purpose of the declaration was, and still is, the expansion -and arguably, imposition- of Western values through the global standardization of human rights.

Essentially, political cosmopolitanism is a system meant from the beginning to improve the global human rights situation, clearly fitting a rather liberal agenda. The examples previously mentioned (ICC, WHO and UN) are fundamentally aimed to help states make progress towards a more just social system that allows for dignity and individual opportunity to exist, as well as numerous others that are more limited in their reach but work towards the same cause, such as the African Union or the European Union. This dynamic is being implemented mainly by the most powerful nations, such as the United States, France, the United Kingdom and many others through globalization and international trade (Howarth 2013). These two phenomenon have unquestionably brought countries closer together by making them dependent on each other.

Globalization has had an enormous impact on the global human rights situation. Capitalist and individualist ideas have spread throughout the world and reached societies where it has had an empowering effect. Of course, the question of whether the overall effects of globalization have been for better or for worse is subjective, but the fact that it has benefitted the cosmopolitan political agenda is undeniable. Author Samir Amin describes globalization as the third wave of devastation of the world by imperialist expansion: “The ideological discourse designed to secure the assent of the peoples of the central Triad (the United States, Western Europe, and Japan) has been refurbished and is now founded on a “duty to intervene” that is supposedly justified by the defense of “democracy,” the “rights of peoples,” and “humanitarianism.”” (Amin 2001). Furthermore, the practice of cosmopolitan politics has been not only a means of Western expansion but it has helped nations of the central Triad, borrowing Amin’s term, to understand and confront problems that are now global and that no nation has the capability to deal with alone. Global warming, extreme poverty, the increasing presence of nuclear weapons, and the international economic arena are just some examples of issues that require collaboration and cooperation; therefore, healthy international relations.

The particular role the international financial market has on cosmopolitanism is as a stabilizer; since countries are now dependent on each other for resources and such, the political and economic stability of their allies and trading partners has a substantial effect on their own stability. The creation of regulations has been absolutely necessary in terms of the structural functionality of the new global economy, and the main entities implementing regulations and conditioning the international market to Western values are the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) (Howarth 2013). These three organizations have a fairly global reach and promote rather capitalist ideals and

standards. It is important to note that cosmopolitan politics are inevitably shaped by individual interests at some extent and therefore it should not be compared to cultural or social cosmopolitanism. Unlike political theories such as communism or socialism, cosmopolitanism is not a system that can rule a nation absolutely and can, in fact, exist within another political system, not unlike feminism or nationalism. What makes political cosmopolitanism so very particular is the fact that it is a system of global politics that requires multilateralism and some extent of cultural globalization. It is a structure meant to economically and socially “liberate” people and create universal commercial and humanitarian standards.

It is critical to understand, though, that the political movement of cosmopolitanism is driven by Western ideals, and therefore promoted by western powers; the cosmopolitan agenda is based on “certain principles and ethical assertions that western societies have come to represent, defend, and seek to export” (Howarth 2013). The whole idea and practice of cosmopolitan politics, as benevolent and innocent we may assume them to be, defeat the essence of cosmopolitanism itself. The philosophical theory of cosmopolitanism describes a system in which all people acknowledge and accept the responsibility they have to every other human, and respect all cultural and ethnical differences. Author Anthony Appiah wrote on his most celebrated book: “I am urging that we should learn about people in other places, take an interest in their civilizations, their arguments, their errors, their achievements, not because that will bring us to agreement, but because it will help us get used to one another (Appiah 2006, 43)”. However, it seems like the main purpose of cosmopolitan politics is, in fact, to bring all nations to agree on European or American values -even if in some cases it has to be induced in a forceful manner.

Naturally, political cosmopolitanism needs to find a balance between cosmopolitanism and nationalism in order to be effective; therefore, it generally falls under the category of “weak cosmopolitanism”. Political cosmopolitanism is an element implemented in political speech and action in order to standardize development -namely economic, environmental or social- by pushing less-developed nations into keeping up with these standards, and incentivize cooperation between nations through mutual values and objectives. As mentioned above, these standards are mostly imposed by Western states and entities, and with their imperialistic nature defeat the whole essence of cosmopolitanism, but the connection -and disconnection- between the political theory and the philosophical theory of cosmopolitanism is irrelevant because a political system (national or international) with true cosmopolitan values cannot exist; philosophical cosmopolitanism is most closely related to collective Anarchism. Author Luke Martell puts forward a rather skeptical view of the application of cosmopolitanism to international politics: “Because clashing interests undermine cosmopolitanism, a best way to pursue it is not to aim for inclusive consensus at a central global level, but to see cosmopolitanism in terms of opposed material interests, best pursued as some interests against others, though a politics of conflict rather than consensus” (Martell 2011).

The reality of the world is that there are a few states that hold the majority of resources and power, and international politics will never be rightly equal and just as long as this is true. “Utilizing cosmopolitanism and nationalism helps to move beyond the otherwise Eurocentric and elitist nature of the cosmopolitan perspective. In addition, it might contribute to addressing one of the major challenges facing modern societies -the accommodation of ethnic and cultural diversity” (Voronkova 2010). Like Martell suggested, “cosmopolitanism may be best aimed at through other kinds of politics -bottom up rather than top down, selectively inclusive rather than



all-inclusive, and conflictual rather than consensual” (Martell 2011). Political cosmopolitanism can only be successful and beneficial to all -or most- as long as the organizations controlling the international economic and humanitarian arenas, such as the UN, ICC, and WHO, as well as the IMF, WTO and WB not only take nationalist interests into consideration, but also respect and work with them. The people must always be wary of the international political system, for there is a fine line between cosmopolitan politics and imperialism.

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