Cosmopolitan Disorders: Ignoring Power, Overcoming Diversity, Transcending Borders

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Abstract

The Cosmopolitan discourse on global governance invokes a global, normative ethic. It presumes a kind of shared civic identity that ignores the burdens of history, obstacles of geography and diversity of peoples, uniting all under a set of identifiable global problems. Critical scholars have moved away from such universalism by advancing their own brand of Cosmopolitan ethic, one anchored in a spatially limited and bottom-up definition of the good life. Yet critical scholars continue to emphasize individual agency, underplaying the structured nature of global inequalities. Consequently, they reinforce, rather than challenge, the current global order. I consider the implications of these models of Cosmopolitanism for issues of power, identity and agency. Any approach to global governance, I argue, must begin by analyzing the relationship between identity and (in)security.

Key Words

Cosmopolitanism, liberalism, critical cosmopolitanism, global governance, identity, power, security.

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Globalisation

The discourse on global governance tends to dissociate time and space. Based on broadly Cosmopolitan principles, it invokes a global normative ethic, a kind of shared civic identity, that ignores the burdens of history, obstacles of geography and the diversity of peoples, uniting all under a set of identifiable global problems. Despite the proliferation of Cosmopolitan arguments and models of governance, it is not an easy task to present a succinct account of current Cosmopolitan theory. Every single text on Cosmopolitanism starts with an observation or recantation that there is nothing resembling a consensus regarding “what constitutes Cosmopolitanism, who can be described as Cosmopolitan or where Cosmopolitanism is to be found”.1 And no less than a dozen strands of Cosmopolitanism exist.2 In what follows, I focus on the dominant approaches to Cosmopolitanism and their critical alternatives.

At its core, Cosmopolitanism believes that all people have equal worth and dignity as members of a common human
family. This commitment to the bond of shared humanity leads Cosmopolitans to call into question the moral significance of national (or any other) borders and identities attached to them. At best, territorial boundaries have only derivative value. The argument is traced back to the Greek Stoics and Cynics who are credited with coining the term-Cosmopolitan- to describe their new identity that transcends the boundaries of the *polis* to embrace the *cosmos*, the only true community. According to David Held, the Stoics believed that “[e]ach person lives in a local community and in a wider community of human ideals, aspirations, and arguments”. Of these, humanity is the only moral identity and association, the former being merely an accident of birth.

Kant saw the emergence of such an order as a natural progression of history, an expression of “the fundamentally moral nature of humanity”. He perceived the interactions between states to be driven by the same “state of nature” logic for which Hobbes had argued the necessity of a social contract in the domestic sphere. All states would strike a global social contract, Kant extrapolated, voluntarily entering into a binding agreement to limit their sovereignty and power. A global civil society would buttress from below and Cosmopolitan international law from above. The result would be nothing less than an end to all wars.

Kant’s recommendations seem particularly relevant in an era of rapid globalisation and the perceived decline of the state. Eşref Aksu sees Kant’s writings on “perpetual peace” as laying the conceptual ground for the current theorising on various global governance arrangements, both in their normative and institutional guises. Kant’s belief in the principles of reason and his emphasis on global consciousness and understanding appeal to many who seek “novel” solutions for “inter-cultural” problems in a post 9-11 world. Kant understood that a better international order could not rely on international law alone. Its success required the right attitudes and dispositions. Reason would be a way to escape from “dogma and
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is a moral perspective that is impartial, universal, individualist, and egalitarian”.14 Much like Liberalism, Kantian Cosmopolitanism aims to reconcile (and promote) liberal notions of individualism with multiculturalism and respect for value pluralism. In Ulrich Beck’s recent interpretation, Cosmopolitanism differs from nationalism and globalism/universalism in that “[i]t neither orders differences hierarchically nor dissolves them, but accepts them as such, indeed invests them with a positive value”.15 Cosmopolitanism perceives “others as different and at the same time as equal”;16 it dismisses “either/or” conjunctions and permits a “both/and” principle to operate, embracing the “unity in diversity” outlook of liberal pluralism. Quite simply, nothing in Cosmopolitanism’s core tenets or its multiple incarnations conflicts with the liberal agenda and its principles. But, as I argue, this means Cosmopolitanism suffers from all the same dilemmas and criticisms—and more!—that afflict Liberalism. Indeed, Liberalism’s dilemmas now drive a wedge among Cosmopolitans. When the clash between local and global cultures cannot be avoided, Cosmopolitans divide into two separate camps, each privileging one level of association over the other. While Liberalism has tried to negotiate the divergent pulls of individual and group identities, Cosmopolitanism has for the most part abandoned any attempt to understand the nature of

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Kant’s argument is echoed in John Rawls’s The Law of Peoples.11 Though the book contributes poorly to the debate and remains woefully out of touch with a rapidly changing world,12 what remains important, particularly in Rawls’ definition of justice as fairness, is the intimate connection between Cosmopolitanism and Liberalism, specifically the American brand.13 Charles Jones notes: “Cosmopolitanism

unvindicated authority”.9 According to Kant, only impartial reasoning could foster a productive dialogue and mutual understanding. Human ability to reason bestows on us a Cosmopolitan right. This means that an individual has “the capacity to present oneself and be heard within and across political communities; ... the right to enter dialogue without artificial constraint and delimitation”.10 Presumably, Kant believed that this open-ended communication would lead to more worldly attitudes and the identity of a world citizen.
identity. Nor are Cosmopolitans able to escape the accusation that a common human culture of individualised and rights-bearing citizens is just another hegemonic attempt to impose the values of a particular culture and society onto the rest of the world. The exaggerated role assigned to Europe, and now its institutional progeny, the European Union (EU), does not advance the impartiality claims of Cosmopolitans. Finally, like Liberalism, Cosmopolitanism suffers from an under-theorised notion of power, especially through economic interest. Therefore, Cosmopolitanism responds weakly to the rapid integration of global markets and the spread of a corporate homogenised culture that poses a threat to any notion of diversity.

In short, both Liberalism and Cosmopolitanism ignore structural inequalities and their effect on societies and identities. Consequently, they tend to reinforce rather than challenge the dominant power imbalance in the global order. Any approach to global governance, I argue, must begin by analysing the relationship between identity and (in)security.

**Cosmopolitanism**

Cosmopolitanism reflects, above all else, a frame of mind. In historic accounts, a Cosmopolitan is often portrayed as a worldly person (usually male) influenced by many cultures and committed to none. He is a child of the modern era of mobility and unlimited choice in everything from what one wears to who one is and what identity one creates. He is a traveller, a global tourist and a connoisseur of all the diverse experiences that the world has to offer. An essential characteristic of a Cosmopolitan is his open orientation to the rich cultural tapestry of humanity. Along with this liberal attitude comes the sense that he is equally at home anywhere in the world. No place or community claims special and permanent loyalty from him. In this sense, a Cosmopolitan is a figure who is typically associated with “the comfortable culture of middle-class travellers, intellectuals and business people”.17

Many emphasise the virtues of Cosmopolitanism in a globalising world order. When borders seem less permanent and technological developments in communications allow millions around the world to connect easily, distance and separation (or even isolation) lose their power to divide and alienate. A resulting physical and virtual mobility means that cultural interactions are more frequent, leading to hybridisation, exchange and understanding. Most students of globalisation assume that the growing interconnectivity among different groups of people results in more frequent dialogue, which grants greater access to alternative perspectives. This
inter-subjective exchange of meaning figures essentially in the formation of empathy and understanding. They agree with Cosmopolitan authors like Salman Rushdie who “celebrate hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs”; they “rejoice in mongrelization and fear the absolutism of the Pure. Mélange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world. It is the greatest possibility that mass migration gives the world...”.¹⁸

Cosmopolitans believe that mere exposure to other cultures and ways of being is sufficient to nudge one towards a Cosmopolitan identity. A journey has a transformative effect of turning a traveller into a thoughtful and reflexive world citizen.

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Nonetheless, identity remains an unsettled topic for most Cosmopolitans. There is little agreement on a moral ordering of different levels of identity. **Thick** Cosmopolitans believe that only global identities are valuable, moral and significant; local ones, as Nussbaum argues, are nonessential. This, in turn, leads to the claim that local identities cannot and should not take priority over broader human loyalties. Our co-nationals, therefore, do not have any extra-claims on our allegiance, loyalty or assistance. Local attachments and conflicts suggest a return to barbarism. Hence, to the extent that Cosmopolitans are interested in identity at all, it is to overcome these limits.

**Thin** Cosmopolitans object to such unflinching impartiality and universalistic identity formation. Some point out that our attachments are parochial and grow outward. In embracing universal affiliation, we risk “[ending] up nowhere- feeling at home neither at home nor in the world”.¹⁹ Or as Heidegger observed, “the frantic abolition of all distance brings no nearness”.²⁰ Nor is it clear that embracing a conceptually borderless world, where local identities are considered shameful and backwards, will lead to anything other than utter alienation. As many cultural critics have observed, we already lead very individualised lives.²¹ The expansion of human rights globally has granted many the freedom of a rights-bearing individual; the spread of global markets has further unravelled our connections to various communities, including familial ties. The growth of these global markets certainly has not led towards any common sense
Cosmopolitans fail to recognise that material considerations and context perforate cultural interactions. Culture is intimately connected to materiality. Here, most Cosmopolitan thinkers are unable or unwilling to reflect critically on their own social status in local, regional and global contexts. As Sypnowich recognises, the Cosmopolitan stance is one of inequality vis-à-vis the rest of the human community. “[T]he Cosmopolitan is typically a privileged person, who has access to foreign travel, some knowledge of art and the means for enjoying it, who possesses sophisticated tastes and a cultivated, open mind”.24 The relatively privileged position of most academics in Western democracies makes them natural allies and advocates of the Cosmopolitan ethic. It is puzzling that the very people who write about a Cosmopolitan ethic for everyone else are unable to reflect on their own social, economic and cultural embeddedness and recognise that “those who express mistrust of Cosmopolitanism, however bigoted and pernicious their views, might well be giving expression to a resentment of cultural inequality that is spawned by material inequality”.25 Hence, an insight clearly lacking from Cosmopolitan arguments is a recognition that identity is inextricably linked to a sense of security. A Cosmopolitan identity owes much to the sense of security and permanence provided by the socio-economic and cultural support systems.

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of responsibility among free market actors. In fact, some would argue that the marketisation of all human spheres has diminished the power of all appeals to a common identity, however broadly imagined. “Intimacy”, Martin Jacques has argued, “is a function of time and permanence”.22 Deep loyalties cannot simply be engineered and the breaking down of borders that separate us may not generate any positive feelings among us. Intimacy “rests on mutuality and unconditionality. It is rooted in trust. As such, it is the antithesis of the values engendered by the market”. If he is correct that “[w]e live in an ego-market society”, how can we generate the necessary commitment to human flourishing implied in thick Cosmopolitanism? Nussbaum and other thick Cosmopolitans presume that moral arguments alone can establish a sense of commitment and care for the well-being of others that usually exists between members of small communities. But as Jacques points out, although “[o]ur relationships may be more Cosmopolitan… they are increasingly transient and ephemeral”.23
that allow individuals to venture beyond the immediate and the familiar.

Note, for example, America’s economic dominance. Not only does it mean that the world’s wealth is unevenly distributed but it also normalises the vulnerability of cultural practices in underdeveloped countries to the behemoth of Western consumerism. While Appiah is willing to concede the overwhelming presence of American pop culture in remote corners of the world, without a theory of global economic order he is unable to link the presence of American goods and the influence of American practices to any clear power inequalities. The most he can concede is that the US benefits from its sheer size and economies of scale and that more open trade is good.

This limited understanding of structures and actors that wield power in the global order betrays an equally limited notion of power. Cosmopolitanism, like Liberalism, tends to equate power and coercive force with the direct power of the state. Most Cosmopolitan thinkers perceive the state as an embodiment of all that is wrong with the current world order. Yet, the focus on the state as the main culprit of the 21st century is unfortunate. It tends to equate all major problems associated with modern society with the rise of the nation-state. Hence, they find themselves in an uncomfortable situation of having to argue against the only viable actor that can put into effect the very policies dear to the Cosmopolitan cause. Human rights enforcement and universal legal principles such as R2P depend entirely on state enforcement. Similar observations can be made about the state’s role in social redistribution. Despite the rhetoric in favour of global regimes, at the moment states are the only political structures that can mitigate the devastating externalities of the global market. Finally, by directing all their critiques against the nation-state, Cosmopolitans underestimate the structural role played by other forces in shaping the international order. Tara McCormack underscores that much of the critical agenda has become part of the mainstream with global norms like the R2P enshrined at the highest level of global governance organisations.

**Cultural/Critical Cosmopolitanism**

In contrast, Boon and Delanty see Europe, for example, as a dynamic space. It cannot be reduced either to European nation-states or equated with some broader global mission. Instead, Europeanisation is something much more multi-layered and polycentric. It relates simultaneously to local and global elements, it exists “both within and beyond the boundaries of the nation state”. To them, Europe represents “a newly emerging social reality”, criss-crossing discourses and identities and giving rise to various socio-cognitive
transformations. Rather than undermining national identities and eroding the foundations of nation states, “Europeanisation” involves a cultural logic of self-transformation. This “self-reflexive development of one’s social, cultural and political subjectivity” is a learning process that might lead to self-transformation. In other words, through the process of Europeanisation, Europeans are learning that identities are not stable or fixed but are always changing and adapting and are called into question by the transformation process itself. Indeed, even Europe itself has no substantive cultural or social identity, since its subjectivity too is an ambivalent concept. The new post-national belonging is an empowering development for in recognising the fluid and open-ended nature of identity and borders, it gives force to those categories disadvantaged by the concept of territorial citizenship-migrants and ethnic minorities.

Without a proper accounting of power and the nature of politics, dialogical Cosmopolitanism remains an academic distraction only.

Finally, Boon and Delanty see Europeanisation as springing forth from creative tensions between “the inside and the outside of our affiliations”. They agree with Beck and Grande that most dichotomies no longer usefully mark understandings of the fluidity of the current epoch. We must adopt a new frame of analysis: border thinking. “In the context of Europe, border thinking (or the upsurge of polyvocality) amounts to an increasing awareness of the vacillation of borders- of the vaporization [emphasis added] of old established certainties”. This radical uncertainty leads us to realise that we, too, are borders “in that we are not quite this nor quite that”. According to Boon and Delanty, the loss of certainty is positive for it constitutes a new discursive space, allowing us to embrace more communicative logic.

Similarly, Chris Rumford offers a concept of “Critical Cosmopolitanism”. To Rumford, Europe presents an excellent counter-hegemonic discourse to globalisation. Like Boon and Delanty, Rumford conceives of Europe as a fluid space, a borderland, where different borders are constantly being reconstituted by different actors and increasingly by citizens themselves. Similarly, Rumford sees this process of Europe’s Cosmopolitanisation as an emancipatory project: that is, a release from the narrow constraints of national identity and national belonging.

But this cultural interpretation lacks any notion of structural power. Emancipation thus does not envision freedom from the constraints of the
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neo-liberal economic order or those imposed by poverty and inequality. Cultural/Critical Cosmopolitans do not see in migrants economic actors fleeing destitution. For Cultural Cosmopolitans, these represent only challenges to the rigid territoriality and identity resulting from the nation-state system.

In Greece, the electoral showing of Golden Dawn bluntly reminds us of how, under the right conditions, even the crudest forms of xenophobic nationalism can seem a “progressive” alternative to the Liberalism of an integrated EU.

In this way, Cultural/Critical Cosmopolitanism fails to engage with the very categories it seeks to undermine with its critical perspective. Culture, identity, belonging and territoriality (borders) all form the core of cultural arguments, yet none of the writers contributing to the debate offer a clear genealogy of these essential concepts. Boon and Delanty recognise that Nussbaum’s radical critique of local attachments is problematic for our ideas of political mobilisation but they proceed, similarly, with a claim that we have no stable identities left. This chronic uncertainty seems not very different in its political implications from Nussbaum’s universalism; in fact, it might lead to psychological developments that are more dangerous and destructive of all genuine political life than is remoteness induced by moral Cosmopolitanism. Hence, while cultural Cosmopolitans embrace radical uncertainty and celebrate increasing insecurity, they fail to consider the possibility that these states of being are not compatible with any stable notion of the self. The embrace of insecurity and uncertainty advocated by Critical Cosmopolitans may produce the toxic localism that they seek to overcome. The rise of the Golden Dawn party in Greece, for example, cannot lead us to such a sanguine position on radical uncertainty. Furthermore, none of these discussions distinguish between a process of Europeanisation that is freely chosen and one that is so clearly imposed by other forces and actors. Hence, while some might celebrate “hybrid identities”, many have no choice in the matter. The latter’s experience with European transformation has been and remains highly disempowering. Finally, as an analytic, Cultural/Critical Cosmopolitanism is short on praxis. At times, it appears to be of no immediate import beyond academic musings. The emphasis on dialogical Cosmopolitanism and global discourse communities contributes usefully to a debate on the nature of democracy in post-national world but a practical import remains missing. As Duncan Kelly says, while
such conversations are crucial, “Politics as endless conversation… ultimately leads to a neutered discussion”. Without a proper accounting of power and the nature of politics, dialogical Cosmopolitanism remains an academic distraction only.

Conclusion

As Gideon Ranchman notes, “[t]he idea that the European Union might represent the culmination of world history is depressing”. Certainly, today’s debates in Europe, about how to deal with the crises in Greece and Spain, who is responsible for the euro’s poor performance and the lack of economic growth, and the proper relationship with Europe’s internal Others, should leave any Cosmopolitan dispirited. All these debates are necessary and significant. But contrary to Beck’s assessment, they do not constitute a critically engaged and reflexive public sphere. The proposals that have been adopted for various economic solutions signal a return to pre-crisis austerity measures and an overall neoliberal agenda. This is hardly a hallmark of critical engagement with the problems that caused the crisis in the first place. Inability to address societal fears about the economic situation has certainly contributed to the rise of far-right parties and attitudes that a few decades ago would have existed mostly on the fringes of society. Today, far-right parties are making steady inroads in the core countries of the EU and are forming alliances across state boundaries to solidify their appeal and political muscle. In Greece, the electoral showing of Golden Dawn bluntly reminds us of how, under the right conditions, even the crudest forms of xenophobic nationalism can seem a “progressive” alternative to the Liberalism of an integrated EU. Cosmopolitan models for all their variety do not engage with these realities and do not offer a workable answer for the forms of governance that could offer a chance for a different future. Even critical versions of Cosmopolitanism remain stubbornly uninterested in the enormous structural power exercised by the global economy and its agents.

As I have argued throughout, most of the problems faced by Cosmopolitan models of global governance are imported directly from its theoretical foundation in Liberalism. At its core, Cosmopolitanism seeks to identify a common first principle of co-existence upon which to build the institutional framework to resolve thorny issues such as “the criteria of inclusion/exclusion, the nature of the society/community to be governed, and the similarity of interests/principles of the subjects of governance”. Like Liberalism, Cosmopolitanism’s emphasis on individual agency focuses on the power that constrains individual choice (including the choice of identity), through the coercive power of the state.
Most Cosmopolitans, therefore, have a difficult time recognising the insecurities created by economic and financial globalisation. Indeed, free trade and the market are typically listed among the core values to be embraced by Cosmopolitan commitments.

The emphasis on consensus, too often hides the fact that there are clear winners and losers in a globally integrated order.

Yet ironically, Cosmopolitans and Liberals overlook human agency. Most people in most societies cannot, in fact, choose among competing visions of reality and future. Despite the platitudes that we get from Cosmopolitan writers, choice has little to do with how globalisation is perceived and how it appears in people's lives. What happens to identity communities under the stress of a violent conflict provides a quick glimpse into the nature of the relationship between identity and insecurity that might be instructive. What we see in Darfur, former Yugoslavia, and again in Syria, is an increased pre-eminence of identity ties as insecurity increases. In Sudan, even prior to the onset of the Darfur crisis, “a half-century of brutal military confrontation has sharpened the place of race and religion in the conflicts.”

As the citizens of Sarajevo found out in 1995, once the bullets start flying and the bodies are piling up, the only rational choice is to retreat to one's identity group even where strong cross-community ties had existed prior to the conflict. The relationship between identity and security provides crucial insight into the nature of societal relations and their breakdown and caution us against over emphasis on flexibility and uncertainty in the formation of self-understanding. Indeed, emphasis on the fluid nature of identity can lead to a great sense of ontological insecurity as person’s stable sense of self is eroded. This in turn can lead to a retreat into a more rigid identity.

We cannot reduce politics to a game of catch-up and a rubber stamp for the “naturalised” economic order. Much of what passes for vigorous accounts of analytic thinking in today’s literature on global governance is plagued by an odd revulsion for all things political. Cosmopolitans argue against the very notion of power or interest-based politics. They see the post-modern era as a dawn of a new, more conciliatory, more benign, less violent and less contentious politics based on mutual recognition of universal commonalities and a consensus culture. The emphasis on consensus, however, too often hides the fact that there are clear winners and losers in a globally integrated order. A truly critical approach to the problem of cross-cultural engagement would recognise that we need secure foundations to engage each other as equals.
Endnotes


3 Brock and Brighouse (eds.), *The Political Philosophy of Cosmopolitanism*, p. ix.


6 Boon and Delanty, “Cosmopolitanism and Europe”, p. 21.

7 Ibid.

9 Held, “Principles of Cosmopolitan Order”, p. 11.
10 Ibid.
11 See for example essays in Gilian Brock and Harry Brighouse (eds.), *The Political Philosophy of Cosmopolitanism*.
13 Indeed, many Cosmopolitans tend to view the global market as a natural ally of individualisation and value pluralism. This liberal heritage leads Ulrich Beck and others to list free trade among the core values of a Cosmopolitan outlook. See, for example, Nussbaum, Pogge, Barry, Buchanan and Appiah.
16 Ibid.
17 Kofman, “Figures of the Cosmopolitan, p. 239.
23 Ibid.
25 Ibid., p. 58.
26 Ibid., p. 71.
27 Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*.

28 Focus on human rights, human security and other individual-based normative principles has highlighted the gaps in and put a pressure on existing state institutions that fail to ensure equal and effective protection of rights. R2P puts a particular emphasis on the positive obligation of states towards the citizens as a condition of sovereignty.


30 Boon and Delanty, “Cosmopolitanism and Europe.

31 Ibid., p. 31.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., p. 32.


36 Ibid., p. 33.

37 Ibid., p. 34.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid., p. 25.

40 Rumford, *Cosmopolitanism and Europe*, p. 17.

41 Golden Dawn is a Greek neo-Nazi party, which received 6.92% of the vote in 2012 national election. It takes a very strong stance on immigration as a national problem and has advocated mining of borders to prevent illegal immigrants from entering Greece. “Greece’s far-right Golden Dawn party maintains share of vote”, *Guardian*, 18 June 2012.


