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Cosmopolitanism

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Cosmopolitanism is a western notion that epitomizes the need social agents have to conceive of a political and cultural entity, larger than their own homeland, that would encompass all human beings on a global scale. Cosmopolite in Ancient Greece meant citizen of the world. Cosmopolitanism presupposes a positive attitude towards difference, a desire to construct broad allegiances and equal and peaceful global communities of citizens who should be able to communicate across cultural and social boundaries forming a universalist solidarity. Its inclusive drive is most evident in moments of crisis of other modes of representing and ascribing membership to existing sociopolitical and cultural units. Much of the malaise and misunderstanding cosmopolitanism may provoke are related to its ambiguity, that is, its unique way of uniting difference and equality, an apparent paradox of wishing to reconcile universal values with a diversity of culturally and historically constructed subject positions.

The composition of the Greek term, cosmopolis, already indicates this unsolved tension: cosmos, a natural universal order, is related to polis, society's variable order. As a consequence, from the Greek democratic city-state to the global village, the idea of a cosmopolite has been haunted by questions such as whose world this is. Can homogeneous external expansionist forces coexist with heterogeneous localized ones? A truly cosmopolitan answer would imply a permanent interest in difference and the recognition that globals and locals depend on each other to exist.

Since its inception, cosmopolitanism has been a category marked by a need to negotiate with 'others' and has reflected tensions between local and supralocal realities, ethnocentric and relativist perspectives, and particularism and universalism. Historically, cosmopolitanism has mirrored the ideologies of different periods and modes of integration to larger, imperial or global, political entities. As a category mostly held by elites, it often means the sophistication that results from familiarity with what is different. It has become a metaphor for mobility, migrancy, sensitivity, and tolerance to otherness, independence from specific authorities, and transcultural and transnational realities and claims. Its opposing concepts have often indicated xenophobia, fixity, parochialism, restricted sovereignty, and allegiance to a motherland, or a nation-state.

1. A Brief History

The history of the relationships between local and supralocal conceptions is probably as old as humankind. A strong trend towards local reality, particularism, diversity, and context may oscillate, such as at the end of the Renaissance or during the Enlightenment, towards an

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emphasis on general formal timeless statements that pretend to be universal. Having its roots in Ancient Greece, cosmopolitanism has been variably present in western philosophical or political discussions. The military conquests of Alexander the Great (356–323 BC) opened up the conditions for the existence of a 'world empire' that allegedly aimed at uniting East and West into an enlightened commonwealth. Greek became the lingua franca of the Hellenistic age (fourth to first century BC), a period that lasted until the establishment of Roman hegemony. Although cosmopolitanism was an issue for Greek philosophers before Stoicism, this school of philosophy established in Athens by 300 BC systematized cosmopolitan theories advancing visions such as that of a world city, an ideal state where everyone would be a citizen. Stoics were instrumental in criticizing Greek ethnocentrism towards barbarians and fostered a sense of brotherhood, a vision of humankind that was transmitted to Romans and predated Christianity's claims to universalism. From the Roman Empire through Medieval Europe cosmopolitanism passed on to different political and intellectual elites. The Christian church played a major role in the reproduction of cosmopolitan ideals and apparatuses by forming transcultural sacred imagined communities and diffusing Latin as the language of a transnational European power.

Some of the fundamental historical processes of long duration that strengthened cosmopolitanism were related to the establishment of modernity, itself a civilizatory cosmopolitan notion and force. The printed book, a new technology of communication developed in mid-fifteenth century, put into question parochialisms in time and space, performing a typical cosmopolitan operation: the enhancement of the consciousness of diversity and the construction of larger imagined communities. Sixteenth-century European expansion gave impulse to the world capitalist system through the incorporation of new territories and populations, and established global colonialism, multiplying the number of images of and contact with exotic others. Science, technology, and reason began their path to hegemony in the construction of universalizing discourses. Market places and urban centers emerged with citizens that experienced new forms of individuality, etiquette, and public space aspiring to new secular ideologies and modes of Republican, democratic governments. The American (1776) and French (1789) Revolutions formally marked this cleavage in time. The Enlightenment and its Encyclopedia represented a climax of universalist ideals.

Impersonal, anonymous relations, mobility, and estrangement were to become the rule for proletarians and the bourgeois in metropolitan centers that were being transformed by an emergent industrial revolution. The time came for capital to intensify its global reach through the networks of new colonial and imperial cosmopolitan elites linked to the development of the nation-state as the dominant form of organizing the equation territory-culture-ideology-politics-state. Expansion of the nation-state had started with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 and consolidated in the nineteenth century. This movement was to be completed only in the twentieth century with the last great wave of decolonization in the 1960s and 1970s. The notable growth of nationalism invigorated its counterpart, internationalism, especially in moments of crisis of the interstate system. After the two World Wars, organisms were inaugurated to regulate the world system and establish new forms of global governance and hegemony: the League of Nations (1920–1946); the United Nations (1945); the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (1944). These agencies are greatly responsible for the dissemination of transnational ideologies and initiatives.

In all these processes, many thinkers have played important roles. They held lay, religious, idealist, positivist, socialist, liberal, conservative, or revolutionary positions, clearly demonstrating the plasticity and efficacity of cosmopolitanism across political and theoretical persuasions. They thought of an international court and army (Abbe de Saint Pierre), a federation of nations and eternal peace (Kant), technological solutions for rationally organizing the planet (Saint-Simon, Goethe), global alliances against oppression (Marx), world government and state (H. G. Wells, Lippmann), world economic regulations (Keynes).

The need for cosmopolites to communicate with a myriad of others has been a crucial leitmotif from Leibniz (a universal system of characters) to Sapir (an international auxiliary language). This ancient quest for a 'debabelized' world, a peaceful community of communication constructed out of heteroglossia, has proved to be unviable given the highly complex ways language communities are reproduced. Moreover, the uneven distribution of power within the world system structures the role certain languages—Greek, Latin, and English, for instance—have played in the construction of cosmopolitan transnational creoles, communities, and imaginaries, leaving little room for initiatives such as Esperanto.

2. Anthropological and Sociological : Considerations

The sentiments cosmopolitanism evokes are not restricted to the western world. Human beings are always interested in knowing where people come from. The ability to locate oneself or others in geographical, cultural, and political terms depends on an array of classificatory categories that are culturally and historically constructed. These modes of representing membership to sociocultural and political units, modes that bind people to collectivies and territories, can be conceived as a continuum of concentric circles ranging from local, phenomenological immediacies, to more distant regional, national, international, and transnational levels of integration whose influence is variably present in the lives of social agents. Given the present nature of world system integration, all these levels are simultaneously present allowing for feelings of multiple belonging, generally conceptualized in terms of 'hybridity.' Participation on one level triggers certain forms of social representations and allegiances that are relational and circumstancial, and that define rigid or flexible identity boundaries and subject positions that in turn inform social cooperation or competition. A person can simultaneously hold allegiances to a neighborhood, a city, a region, a country, or a continent, or be a transmigrant in a world city or, yet, a global nomad, an employee of a transnational corporation.Muchof the discussion on whether cosmopolitanism is possible or not rests on a disconsideration of the simultaneous presence of these forces of identity construction, which resonates with essentialist conceptions of identity. The existence of broad-based encompassing forms of integrating people and territory under the same political and symbolic umbrella does not mean the end of narrower ones. Otherwise, how could one explain the persistence of regional and ethnic separatism within nation-states? It should be clear, though, that while everyone is local, not everybody is global.

Many forces have made contemporary cosmopolitanism possible: individualism with its relative detachment from immediate, narrow solidarities; global expansion of economic and political systems by military, commercial, and religious means; development of transportation and communication technologies that have exacerbated time-space

compression and, consequently, the circulation of people, information, and commodities on a planetary scale; growth of global cities and the heightening of cultural and ethnic heterogeneity they have brought; the empire of the mass media especially of global television and the emergence of the information era with its worldwide virtual web; new political actors such as nongovernmental organizations that are fueled by transnational organizations and ideologies.

Two criticisms are commonly made against cosmopolitanism: one, that it is an elitist social representation; the other, that it is an impossible project. Arguments can be offered to counterbalance both these points. The intense global migratory movements of the last two centuries generated large numbers of uprooted people, complex urban and national ethnic segmentations, transnational networks, and diasporic cultures that, intermixed with the works of the mass media, created a popular cosmopolitanism, fueling processes and visions of globalization from below. It is thus necessary to explore the existence of several cosmopolitanisms. Popular cosmopolitanisms differ from corporate ones, which in turn differ from those of bourgeois tourists, business magnates, or international scholars. There is no doubt that exposure to difference and cultural diversity is increasing rapidly as is the number of transmigrants and differentiated groups, most often occupational ones, amongwhomallegiance to a nation-state is secondary. The efficacy of historical and sociological facts (such as the Atomic Bomb, satellite planetary integration, the global interconnection of stock markets, global consumer culture, the European Union) and of new universalist ideologies (such as environmentalism and the defense of human rights), together with the emergence of new political subjects and social movements, has further stimulated articulations and actions of a new transnational activism. For some, all this will result in the organization of a global civil society. In spite of the fact that these processes also generate relativist critiques in face of the unequal global distribution of power (the South‑North divide in activism also draws a line of asymmetrical relationships and access to visibility and infrastructure), they engender a more concrete framework for cosmopolitanism than in any previous period. Extraterritoriality is another real challenge to legal systems firmly set on national legislations and jurisdictions in a world system where imperial powers or multinational military alliances operate.

3. Cosmopolitanism, Globalization, and Transnationalism

With the completion of the nation-state system in the 1970s, cosmopolitanism clearly meant transcending this entity. Nation-states were then viewed as a homogenizing force by an arising postmodern critique tired of the universalist metanarratives of the Enlightenment based on discursive matrices, such as progress, embodied by contemporary nation-states. French-inspired postmodernism hit mainstream academia, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, in the United States, favoring visions of global heterogeneity and multiculturalism. More than ever, the discussion on cosmopolitanism became intimately intertwined with debates on transnationalism. In the late 1980s, the end of 'really existing socialism' helped to propagate the image of a unified world, monopolized by a triumphant capitalism under the hegemony of powerful transnational corporations and financial capital. In the kingdom of flexible, postfordist capitalism, globalization turned into a mantra and much of the typical tensions inherent to cosmopolitanism as a notion were dramatized within the localist‑globalist

framework of analysis, sometimes regarded as antithetic polarities, othertimes as complimentary and articulated terms. Notions of transnational classes, cultures, and identities entered the horizon of the social sciences.

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There are two major currents of interpretation and promotion of transnational cosmopolitanism. The first is dominated by transnational capitalists and associated elites that praise a borderless neoliberal world, that is, unrestricted access to domestic markets and natural and social resources, and the empowerment of global actors and agencies such as the World Bank, the IMF, and the World Trade Organization. The second is composed of intellectuals, some of them within academia (working mostly in the fields of anthropology, cultural studies, economics, geography, international relations, political science, and sociology), others in nongovernmental organizations, who are advancing visions of heterogeneity, heteroglossia, migrancy, cultural diversity, or empowerment of local actors, and claiming a need for global governance and a global civil society to regulate the power of transnational deterritorialized elites. In different ways, both sides feed on universalist ideologies such as development (with its promises of unlimited fortune and technological transcendence), republicanism, liberalism, socialism, environmentalism, and the defense of human rights. They are also strengthened by new transnational frameworks of cultural and political activity engendered by the new technologies of communication of late twentieth century. The latter have become a focus of explorations on global culture, on the emergence of new fragmented and flexible identities, electronic public spaces and interactions, cultural hybridty and cosmopolitan political communities. The Internet has brought about the possibility of a transnational imagined virtual community: a decentered cosmopolitan crowd, synchronized by cyberspace, interacting on real-time, and engaging in global commercial, cultural, and political exchanges.

Cosmopolitanism frequently is conflated with the imperial inclinations of a historical period; a fact that stresses its contradictory relationships with power. In the early twenty-first century, it will be criticized increasingly as a disguised form of Americanism or of serving transnational capital. Will the future see a homogenizing global state or a heterogeneous

planetary civil society? Be that as it may, one thing is certain, cosmopolitanism—the need to transcend received loyalties and attachments in favor of imagining distant unknown others, of constructing broader solidarities and global notions of citizenship— will continue to furnish, with its pacifist, egalitarian, utopian reverberations, a powerful ideological window into the future of a shrinking world.

See also: Cross-cultural Psychology; Cultural Assimilation; Cultural Diversity, Human Development, and Education; Global History: Universal and World; Globalization and World Culture; Metropolitan Growth and Change: International Perspectives; Transnational Citizenship: Cultural Concerns

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