Cosmopolitanism

According to Eurocentric narratives the concept of cosmopolitanism has a rich lineage beginning its life with Diogenes’ (c. 412 BC – 323 BC) cry to be a “citizen of the world” and then being most commonly associated with the Stoics, Pauline Christianity, and Enlightenment thinkers such as Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). This expresses the core idea shared by some cosmopolitan thinkers that all human beings belong to a single community and the ultimate units of moral or theoretical concern are individual human beings, and not the state or particular forms of human association. However, critiques of Kant in particular note the limitations to who is included in, and excluded from, European understandings of humanity. Kant’s understanding of racial hierarchies excluded those he understood to be less than human from his moral frames and therefore from ethical treatment and cosmopolitan engagement (see Charles W. Mills 1997). (1)

Further, ‘cosmopolitanism’ itself is not a Western universal. The cosmopolitan desire does not emanate from one epistemic location. It is found in traditions globally. This desire has been shaped from a diverse legacy of epistemologies,
ontologies, methodologies, and imaginaries other than those developed in the Western academy. As such, cosmopolitan thought can be found within the diverse ancient works of numerous Egyptians, Hebrews, Chinese, Ethiopians, Assyrians, and Persians (see Brown & Held, 2010:3–4; for a wide ranging and important discussion of non-Western and pre-modern forms of cosmopolitanism, see Webb 2015).

Historically, another cry for human connectedness was formulated alongside that of Diogenes and comes from Buddhism (See Ward 2013, for an account of Buddhist cosmopolitanism). As Dharwadker (2001: 7) states, the cosmopolitan argument of an inclusive idea of humanity and our interconnectedness put forward by the Buddha foreshadows the Greek formulation of cosmopolitanism in interesting ways. Similarly, in the work of Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) we find a challenge to overcome uncritical loyalty to nationalism and to build a world not broken into fragments (Tagore 2008; See also Rao 2012 and Bose 2006).

From the African tradition of Ubuntu, Desmond Tutu also brings a similar perspective in which “my humanity is caught up and inextricably bound up in yours.” As Ngcoya (2015) states such a view promotes a reflective sense of interdependence which stresses that our identity and potential for being human is realized through our engagement with others. Such an understanding is articulated in the expression: Umuntu umuntu ngabantu (a person is a person because of/by/ through other people). Such a principle states that the ethical foundations of a just society are not to be found in material gain but through the development of ethical relationships based on reciprocity, hospitality and through recognizing our interconnectedness.
From the tradition of Confucianism, we find a similar account of the connectedness of being human and also of our responsibility to others that can be understood as having cosmopolitan themes. In Confucianism’s concern for “all under Heaven” (tianxia), stands an ethical concern and responsibility for literally all that is under heaven. Following on from this is a distinctive principle of the “unity of Heaven and man” that refutes any opposition between man and nature. Lastly, the idea that if one has developed as a person one should contribute to society (See Young and Sang 2014).

The work of Walter Mignolo crosses time and space to explore consciousness in an effort to understand how we have collectively arrived at this place and what possibilities are available to us for the future. He has attempted over a long career to provide space through which various anti-colonial, post-colonial and de-colonial epistemologies can exist and connect in order to provide opportunities for new ways of seeing the world. Mignolo too sees the creative possibilities incumbent in the cosmopolitan imagination. However, in his concept of border thinking the opportunity for change occurs at the epistemic and ontic border between the marginalised and modernity. Border thinking then becomes a ‘tool’ of the project of critical cosmopolitanism and a ‘future planetary epistemological and critical localism’ (Mignolo, 2012[ 2000]: 157). This would not aim at the creation of a universal ideological position but instead emphasises the acceptance of different ways of being, not by positing a “blueprint of a future and ideal society projected from a single point of view [that of abstract universals] that will return us [again] to the Greek paradigms and European legacies” (Mignolo 2000: 744), but by being reflexive about one’s own, and more importantly, the ‘Other’s’ standpoint.
Essential Reading:


Further Reading:


**Footnote:**

(1) However, as Katrin Flikschuh and Lea Ypi point out there is a developmental trajectory, though underdeveloped, in Kant’s writings on cosmopolitanism in respect of European relations with the non-European that is often not included in literature critical of Kant’s cosmopolitanism.

**Questions:**

1) Can you describe the ‘cosmopolitan imagination’?

2) After your reading of accounts of cosmopolitanism do you think that “… to belong or not to belong is the cosmopolitan question”? (Beck 2003).

3) The cosmopolitan is apparently arguing that cultures are incomplete and that each culture can learn from other cultures. What do you think they could mean by this? Can you give some examples?
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Image Credit: “Awareness of Between-ness” between Memory and Self. Miho Watanabe | Artist | Sydney | 2014.