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One World or Many? Critical Reflections on Cosmopolitanism and International Relations

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Cosmopolitanism has come to represent a wide spectrum of positions within IR theory over the decades, ranging from the anti-utopianism of the Cold War liberals to the contemporary liberal institutionalism. The article charts this intellectual trajectory by listing out the major shifts in cosmopolitanism's normative agenda and explains how it has been challenged from various critical vantage points. Third Worldism and postcolonialism, among others, have pointed at the loaded connotations attached to universalism, a tenet central to cosmopolitan thought. The critiques are of epistemic value since they underline the need to seek, and recover, the universal visions undergirding these context-rich discourses. Through specific examples, the article examines how anti-colonial movements and transnational solidarities like Third World internationalism attempted to realise these visions, thereby pointing to creative ways in which cosmopolitan and communitarian forces could be gainfully reconciled. Relatedly, the article looks at how cosmopolitanism and its critiques seek to lower the scale by bringing in popular articulations of transnationalism in the Global South that have typically been written out of staple accounts of cosmopolitanism. The article critically examines the extent to which cosmopolitanism can deal with the diverse matrix of actors, institutions and processes in world politics. It argues why its notion of the moral community must reflect this diversity if it has to adapt to the shifts in the practice of international relations.

Keywords: Cosmopolitanism, Third World internationalism, Global South, liberal institutionalism, postcolonialism

International Relations (IR) in the last couple of decades has found itself compelled to academically engage with issues of growing complexity. Be it the changing nature of war or the unravelling of development paradigms in the face of environmental degradation, issues have confounded the set parameters of mainstream IR theory by their complex and diffused nature. Although one is tempted to see cosmopolitanism's growing prominence in this context, it would be a misleading premise to begin this enquiry with. Cosmopolitanism enjoys a long lineage and has diversified ever since into variants that variously argue for the protection of community rights, the preservation of cultural identities and the strengthening of institutions of global governance (Cartier, 1999; Erskine, 2008; Jabri, 2007). Its tradition of debate and dialogue notwithstanding, cosmopolitanism may find the current political and intellectual climate conducive to a renewed thrust. Issues that entangle the state, society, and the environment have thrown open the insular spaces within which mainstream IR theories prefer to operate. As conventional notions of state, security, and territoriality stand challenged, cosmopolitanism, as an approach that abhors closures and insularities, has found new entry points into the debate on rights and the limits on state capacity.

The article offers a theoretical and historically informed engagement with cosmopolitanism and its critiques. Given the complexity of the debates, it demonstrates, with the help of illustrative examples, how the global, regional and national analytical scales intersect. In approaching cosmopolitan thought from the 'outside in' rather than the 'inside out', the article examines how it has been interpreted and adapted by other approaches that have an abiding interest in the idea of the moral community but choose to redefine it. Through an engagement with the literature on cosmopolitanism, postcolonialism, multiculturalism and Third Worldism in particular, the article attempts to outline how they seek to redraw the contours of the community to reflect their diverse agendas. In doing so, it problematises the dichotomy between elite and popular forms of internationalism and between cosmopolitan and communitarian forces that are often encountered in the literature.

The juxtapositioning of cosmopolitanism and IR is of particular interest to us, given their diverse orientations. IR's affinity towards stable, enclosed territorial spaces is well known, as is its tendency to align identity and territoriality to the extent possible. The discipline, dominated by a realist and positivist orientation, has grudgingly yielded ground to approaches that have sought to engage with issues of culture, human rights and environment at the fringes of mainstream research. Postcolonial studies, historical sociology and constructivism begin by problematising the epistemological foundations of IR (Barkawi and Laffey, 2002; Lawson, 2006; Sterling-Folker and Shinko, 2005, pp. 639-642; Young, 2004, p. 51). Ultimately, intellectual histories are articulations of power; they reflect the dominant voices within a discipline, and their construction comes to typify tradition. Cosmopolitanism is concerned less with reflexivity than with the issue of fulfilment of the self within social contexts, ones that encompass multiple possibilities for human development. Its pitch for wider cultural landscapes and collective action offers a counter-narrative to traditional IR's proclivity towards bounded frames of reference.

The two strands of cosmopolitanism—universality and egalitarianism—define its normative agenda (Rao, 2010, p.10). Cosmopolitans regard the world through the universalist lens as a diverse but cohesive whole, a community in which all humans have equal moral worth. This global fraternity has further been understood through two frames: the normative and the empirical-analytic (Rao, 2010, p.11). In normative terms, the cosmopolitan ethos seeks to work towards inclusive membership, a vision of how the international community *ought* to be ordered. On the other hand, the empirical-analytic lens interprets cosmopolitanism in terms of border crossings, a world that is interconnected by the sheer mobility that defines human history. Christopher Lee's reference to 'fugitive cosmopolitanism', to describe the itinerant and often precarious lives of left-leaning and anti-apartheid activists and artists during the Cold War draws attention to how exile became a mode of encountering other cultures (Popescu, 2021, p. 802). Its focus, hence, is on the circulatory networks that rendered possible 'ways of living at home abroad or abroad at home' (Pollock cited in Rao, 2010, p.11). Postcolonialism presents a contrarian position, as it regards such a feel-good narrative of cosmopolitanism as elusive and shot through with hegemonic values. It draws attention, instead, to discursive spaces, which function to legitimise the many manifestations of power. Postcolonialism, hence, invites critical attention to the divide between the significant and the banal and of the transgressions, wilful and otherwise, that define this supposed binary (Gilroy, 2015, p.9). Similarly, universalism and its search for commonalities became the subject of critique within the multiculturalism discourse that saw it as a homogenising force corrosive of cultural differences.

The Centrality of Context

In the ensuing debate over the relative merits of uniformity and diversity, cosmopolitanism sought to disengage itself from endeavours aimed at flattening out differences for the sake of a higher good. Instead, it recognises the centrality of context: the imperative to locate individuals and their actions in the milieu they live in. As the historian François Furet noted, for 'an event to acquire significance, it must be integrated into a pattern of other relations, in relation to which it will become meaningful' (Devetak, 2009, p.797). A key difference that sets cosmopolitanism apart from universalism is that it forswears a pre-conceived agenda for action, a conceptualisation of the good 'higher' than existent social settings (Mehta, 2000). Its proponents claim that the terms of debate within cosmopolitanism are set not by a universal benchmark of progress against which societies are to be measured for their compatibility but by the debate itself. It acknowledges the diversity of identities, practices and philosophies as participants in a dialogue rather than as passive subjects of analysis.

Its readiness to embrace diverse perspectives bears a strong affinity with multiculturalism (Kymlicka, 1989), but its abiding focus remains trans-cultural, trans-local conversations that urge us to think beyond the particularities that make up our worlds. Thus, cosmopolitanism acknowledges both the imperative to transcend differences and the urge to defend one's cultural identity. It offers a dynamic interface between the two in that it redefines what we understand as transcending and defending identities. In a similar vein, Chandran Kukathas attempted to reconcile cultural differences with moral universalism through his notion of radical toleration. Radical toleration forswears cultural rights in which groups are not to be seen as fixed entities with their own set of entitlements (including the right to make their members conform) but as associations that individuals are free to join or exit. For Kukathas, universalism was inherent to such an approach for '[e]veryone has a duty of forbearance from intervention in the affairs of others, which only self-defence can defeat. It is certainly a view that acknowledges the humanity of all peoples (Kukathas 2008, p. 593). Cosmopolitans like Martha Nussbaum, on the other hand, seek the universal, arguing that cultures may represent different conceptions of a good life, but they are really iterations of shared principles of humanism and justice. Seen thus, cultures equip individuals to challenge oppression within their respective communities (Kukathas, 2008, p. 588).

Given its orientation, it is evident that cosmopolitanism reposes faith in the ability of robust institutions to create and support such a discursive space. It is in making a determined pitch for strengthening institutional frameworks of global governance that the cosmopolitan interface with IR is most apparent (Held, 2006). Towards this, it envisions the existence of a range of governance mechanisms, from sub-regional to regional and global institutions, from multilateral platforms to legal organisations that encompass a host of judicial, regulatory and governance measures that define the global order.

Environmental politics is a domain in which this push to tackle resource governance at the trans-territorial level becomes rather evident. The notion of hydrosolidarity offers one such ‘post-sovereign’ vision of the world. It seeks to overcome the hydroegoism that the states demonstrate whereby their self-interest becomes the primary determinant of water resource management. Instead, it reconceptualises water management to include social justice and human rights in the discourse. That hydrosolidarity has been an important point of reference for the World Water Forums in 2003 and 2006 testifies to its policy relevance (Gerlak; Varady & Haverland, 2009, p. 314). A crucial step towards realising the cosmopolitan ideal has been the creation of river basin authorities, cooperative mechanisms that today account for 40 per cent of transboundary river basins globally (Gerlak; Varady & Haverland, 2009, p. 318). For instance, the setting up of the Technical Cooperation Committee for the Promotion of the Development and Environmental Protection of the Nile (TECCONILE) around knowledge communities of experts and local groups was indicative of the diversification beyond state-centrism on the Nile’s management (Stetter; Herschinger; Teichler & Albert, 2011, p. 454). The global discursive context is significant here. The global environmental discourse has coalesced around sustainability, universalism and the marshalling of scientific evidence. The embedding of a water conflict within the global discourse on sustainable and participatory water management could aid in preventing it from escalating to more advanced stages of conflict (Stetter; Herschinger; Teichler & Albert, 2011, p. 455). As Wolf put it ‘once cooperative water regimes are established through treaties, they turn out to be impressively resilient over time, even when between otherwise hostile riparians, and even as conflict is waged over other issues’ (Wolf, 1998, p. 251).

This has necessarily induced an added emphasis on legalism, for the deliberative space has to be a protected realm, one that ensures democratic means begets democratic outcomes. Hence, cosmopolitanism envisions not the creation of additional multi-level governance mechanisms to recompense the democratic deficit in world politics but their subordination to an overarching legal structure that enforces principles of international law. Its underlying assumption is that the international system is populated by democratically organised entities other than the state, and the more reflective global governance is of such participatory structures, the better its functioning would be. Clearly, the twin processes of democratisation and the creation of system-wide institutions engage the intellectual energies of cosmopolitan theorists the most (Dryzek, 2006).

Founded as it may be on a liberal institutionalist vision of IR, cosmopolitanism finds itself up against approaches that point to persistent inequalities in world politics. The neorealist, who chooses to analyse international politics through power differentials between states, is sceptical of any attempt at evolving a common approach to shared concerns. In what realists see as a threatening environment, issues become arenas where states negotiate their interests rather than offer possibilities for collective democratic action. The postcolonial theorist likewise views such a shared space as a site of contestation as it allows power to assume more latent and insidious guises (Mattern, 2004). Seen thus, the entire cosmopolitan enterprise becomes a discourse of the powerful, imbued with hegemonic intent.

An area in which we encounter these undercurrents is the repatriation of museum objects. Colonialism saw a steady traffic of artefacts from the colonies to the metropolises, which are today displayed in museums around Europe. Their diverse collections enable these once-colonial institutions to lay claim to representing the historical diversity of humanity. For instance, the British Museum asserts that it is 'grounded in the Enlightenment idea that human cultures can, despite their differences, understand one another through mutual engagement' (www.britishmuseum.org). This cosmopolitan logic frames the museum as a universal institution, catering to a world audience and, in doing so, pitches all collections as offering culturally specific but valuable insights into world history. This is borne out in visitor numbers. Britain's museums and galleries witness 120 million visitors annually. The British Museum alone sees 6.7 million footfalls each year, up from 4.8 million in 2009 (Casely-Hayford, 2017, p. 6). This centripetal force has allowed 'encyclopaedic museums' to focus on showcasing world history under one roof and sidestep the contentious issue of repatriation. Countries of origin have been demanding the return of cultural property from these museums, with the Parthenon Marbles, the Kohinoor and the Benin Bronzes representing some of the more prominent claims. Christine Sylvester analyses how the discourse of global custodianship makes its way down from powerful institutions (such as the Bizot Group, a powerful clique of 40 museums across the world) to inform museum policies regarding such demands for repatriation (Sylvester, 2009, pp. 36-39). They contend that objects, held 'in trust for the nation and the world'; belong to humanity regardless of their country of origin (www.britishmuseum.org). As Jayashree Vivekanandan notes, '[t]hrough their 'share not return' policy, museums claim to be an encyclopaedic resort to cosmopolitan principles of shared heritage as a workable solution' (Vivekanandan, 2021, p. 5).

Troubled Transitions

Cosmopolitanism's transition from a moral-philosophical enquiry to a political approach has been a troubled one. In its encounter with IR, cosmopolitanism has run aground key hurdles that could potentially undermine its very core principles. The approach's abiding emphasis on the need to develop a sense of belonging to a collectivity, a social whole bigger than the sum of its parts, has proven especially hard to operationalise (Dobson, 2005). Admittedly, there are credible reasons to believe that incremental progress is discernible in areas such as environmental law and international humanitarian law. Protracted negotiations within multilateral frameworks have meant that dialogue around global concerns has become increasingly structured and formalised. While this may be expected and even inevitable, multilateral institutions today are an imperfect realisation of the cosmopolitan dream. Characterised more by existing power dynamics and statist positions than by solidarity, institutional frameworks have been rendered tenuous through acts of unilateralism and exclusionism by states; the US decision to stay out of the Kyoto Protocol being a case in point (Dryzek, 2006).

The democratic deficit in global governance has led scholars to explore alternatives to the 'constitutionalisation' of the international system (Dryzek, 2006). Discursive democracy occupies the public space that cosmopolitanism can claim as its own, but it shuns the operative dimensions of structured co-action characterised by the latter. It instead attempts to approach democratisation from the other end, building up a critical mass of support through an informal network of democratic experiments and from popular protest movements across the world to transnational social networks. Movements such as the Arab Spring protests signal a galvanised transnational public space that revels in its disorganised nature. Farida Makar observes how the demonstrators during the Egyptian Revolution transformed Tahrir Square into a site of artistic expression, complete with live poetry recitations and an exhibition displaying 'souvenirs' from their protests (Makar, 2011, p. 310). The nuances that separate the ordered from the unscripted are often lost on traditional IR theorisations that are prone to collapsing both within the catchall phrase 'global civil society'.

Scholars have sought to approach cosmopolitanism from the perspective of non-Western IR in an attempt to make it relevant to its theorisations of the state in the Third World. Critical approaches countered the perceived ahistoricity in traditional IR by attempting to offer a social theory of the state (Chowdhry & Nair, 2002; Darby, 1998; Hacohen, 2009). Sugata Bose critiques the advocates of cosmopolitanism who privilege 'detached reason' and equate patriotism with narrow particularism, thereby discrediting anti-colonial struggles. According to Bose, '[c]olourless cosmopolitanism has been assigned with a high moral ground; colourful patriotism is deemed to be seductive but devoid of any ethical content' (Bose n.d., p. 2). Arguing that different strands of patriotism are compatible with cosmopolitan ideals, he underlines the need to recover the universalist visions that undergirded anti-colonial movements (Bose n.d., p. 3). In the postcolonial context, Rahul Rao juxtaposes cosmopolitan and communitarian impulses in his analysis of state-building in the Third World. Cosmopolitanism is warily regarded by these states for its justification of humanitarian intervention, thereby becoming a discourse politically convenient to the West (Rao, 2010, p.7). Since the postcolonial states are keen on preserving their sovereignty, cosmopolitan ethics reflected the realities of an uneven international order and, hence, legitimised the intrusive strategies of the Western world.

For Monica Popescu, reading cosmopolitanism and Third Worldism in conjunction presents interesting avenues to understand the internationalist solidarities that had informed Afro-Asianism in the twentieth century (Popescu, 2021). The relatively recent term Afropolitanism, coined by Taiye Selasi in 2005, points to the dynamic connectedness and hybridity that characterise Africans dispersed across different African cultures and across the world. It could be seen as recessed within the wider ecosystem of Afro-Asian internationalism in which the left-leaning intellectuals and artists of the Cold War circulated. However, Popescu argues that in the ideological settings of the Cold War, cosmopolitanism carried a whiff of capitalist encounters, signalling certain complacency that the leftists and socialists were wary of. Their antidote to cosmopolitanism was internationalism even though, as she notes, they both staked a claim on egalitarian and inclusive humanism (Popescu, 2021, p.801).

Other transnational encounters cut across the now-familiar axis between the West and the non-West. The black civil rights movement in the US saw the forging of ties not only among African American activists but also with anti-colonial campaigners in India. The synergies that informed the twin liberation struggles against racism and colonialism defined what Nico Slate terms as 'coloured cosmopolitanism', a 'hidden history' stretching from the nineteenth century till the 1960s (Slate, 2017). Adom Getachew analyses the universalist aspirations behind the world's only successful revolution against slavery (Getachew, 2016, p. 821). The Haitian revolutionaries offered a radical interpretation of black citizenship that was inclusive of all those who wanted to escape the clutches of colonial slavery and colonial rule. She estimates that six to 13,000 African Americans sought and gained asylum in Haiti, a fact that points to how this redefinition of blackness in trans-territorial terms was realised (Getachew, 2016, p. 836). Haiti's transformative politics demonstrates how anti-colonial movements articulated cosmopolitan ideals in the Global South way, which expansively defined the moral community to include groups that were marginalised by imperialism and, subsequently, neo-imperialism. Such 'geographies of affinity' alert us to how integral the empire and the state were to articulations of freedom and emancipation but which were, at the same time, not reducible to imperial and statist politics alone (Menon, 2021, p.4). Homi Bhabha's notion of vernacular cosmopolitanism and Anthony Appiah's rooted cosmopolitanism could be situated in this context.

Given these many entanglements, cosmopolitanism's reluctance to engage with the notion of the state in a manner that brings its own ontological experiences to bear is intriguing. The approach envisions a cosmopolitan world without adequately factoring in the state; the state embodies an insular political community that must be transcended for the vision to be realised. Cosmopolitanism's vision of world citizenship is predicated on the human capacity and willingness to transcend state jurisdictions. Timothy Brennan contrasts this cosmopolitan ideal with internationalism which does not seek to overcome the juridical differences that define state sovereignties, chiefly for pragmatic reasons. As Brennan notes, 'If cosmopolitanism springs from a comfortable culture of middle-class travellers, intellectuals and businessmen, internationalism ...is an ideology of the domestically restricted, the recently relocated, the provisionally exiled and temporarily weak. It is addressed to those who have an interest in transnational forms of solidarity, but whose capacities for doing so have not yet arrived' (Brennan, 2001, p.42).

Rachel Leow's analysis of popular internationalism in the Third World in the 1950s and 1960s is relevant here. She refers to 'sub-diplomatic encounters'—events held below the formal diplomatic level—which brought together peace activists, trade unionists and women's rights activists from the Western and Eastern blocs during the Cold War period. The Asia-Pacific Peace Conference (APC) held in Beijing in 1952 was one such encounter that drew 470 activists and observers from nearly 50 countries. An event that 'featured no Zhou Enlais, Nehrus or Sukarnos' but historians, lawyers, educators and economists—whom Leow terms 'subaltern internationalists'—the APC succeeded in mobilising support for non-alignment and peaceful coexistence in the developing world (Leow, 2019, p.30). More such conferences that were convened at the intersection of international peace movements and Third World internationalism followed in Vienna, Berlin and Delhi, to name a few. The Conference on the Relaxation of International Tension (CRIT) in New Delhi in 1955 preceded the official Conference of Asian-African Countries at Bandung by days. Termed as the 'People's Bandung' by Carolien Stolte, it was attended by thousands of participants, unlike the formal Bandung conference, which was a closed-door event (Stolte 2019, p. 126). Encounters such as these compel us to problematise the simplistic dichotomy between elite and popular forms of internationalism in the Third World. While both, in their respective ways, furthered the cause of peace, transnational solidarities representing cosmopolitan values have not garnered much attention. As Leow observes, 'These become visible only when we look beneath the thin froth of elite diplomacy to the sea of subaltern mobilities that comprise the missing realms of decolonial internationalism' (Leow, 2019, p.53).

As evident from above, popular internationalism expanded concurrent to the growing prominence of multilateral agencies at the regional and global levels that regulate transnational flows. These have reworked the remits of sovereignty rather than outrightly subvert it. The state remains the sole representative in the international organisations such as the United Nations. Further, it has worked towards creating a complex landscape of multilateral institutions like the European Union. It is also worth noting that non-state actors that are transnational in their operations are not entirely unencumbered but tethered to particular territorial and jurisdictional settings. Multinational companies and transnational agencies rely on the logistical and regulatory structures to function in host countries. Even ostensibly global networks lean on the state for the security of their overseas operations and to facilitate smooth functioning, although their activities may not come directly under the purview of the state. The centrality of the state is, ironically, underlined by the fact that the very movements protesting against the state seek to draw attention to its acts of omission or commission, as the case may be.

The state could thus become an important cog within the cosmopolitan scheme of things, given the greater salience national policy frameworks have than international legal regimes (Brown, 2011). If the results of the Eurobarometer survey are anything to go by, individuals continue to identify themselves primarily by their nationality in overwhelming numbers (Pichler, 2008, pp.1113-14). Engaging the state implies recognising the significance and impact of national identity in the lives of individuals, limited as its conceptualisation may be. The failure to operationalise the state partly explains why cosmopolitanism has not eased into being a robust theory in IR that grapples with existing interpretations of the core concerns of the discipline.

Conclusion

A potential entry point into the debate would be to examine the changing role of the state within the larger framework of multilevel governance that, in many ways, epitomises cosmopolitan impulses. Multilevel governance alludes to nested strata of policy-making and policy implementation that embed actors operating at different levels. The very basis of the framework is the assumption that transnational issues require intervention and coordination by agencies that cut across discrete, vertical layers of sovereign control. One of the key arguments put forward by cosmopolitan theorists is the increasing imperative for states to coordinate their policies necessitated by the prominence and urgency of transnational issues. In addressing global and regional concerns, states have had to share, and in some cases cede, policy-making space. The role the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) a coalition of NGOs working on phasing out anti-personnel mines, played in making the Mine Ban Treaty a reality in 1997 is a well-known example of such policy coordination, an initiative that won the ICBL the Nobel Peace Prize that year. With its 164 state parties the Ottowa Treaty, as it is referred to, drastically changed the mode of warfare of the states engaged in. Such sharing of policy space by state and non-state actors in ways that impinge on state choices and interests signals the rise of a networked multilevel polity (Chandhoke, 2003; Gamble, 2000; Keck & Sikkink, 1998). Marked by shifting coalitions of issue-based linkages, its politics straddles different analytical levels from the global and regional to the subregional and local. This, in turn, shines a light on a panoply of actors populating the policy landscape that include citizen forums, multinational corporations, media, trade unions, research community and scientific organisations, among others. It draws attention to the politics of framing and agenda setting and to how issues are negotiated and solutions are arrived at. Multilevel governance works on the assumption that the greater the involvement of actors who are directly affected by issues and policy outcomes in the decision-making process, the greater the likelihood of such decisions being suited to their requirements (Bache & Flinders, 2004b; Marks, 1993, pp. 402-03). The principle of subsidiarity is based on this premise; that policies must be determined at the lowest level in ways that involve the affected. It enables us to advance beyond the formal understanding of citizenship and rights to grasp its complex and lived manifestations and the contestations such discrepancies between the rhetoric and the practice entail. Given these complexities, governance is no longer seen as solely state-guided; indeed, the role of the state changes from policy control to policy coordination (Bache & Flinders, 2004a).

Cosmopolitanism holds out the possibility of wider prospects, a reminder that there exist choices to be exercised. Significantly, in a domain such as IR that largely privileges the state as the prime mover of politics, it seeks to restore agency to the individual. However, it is imperative to acknowledge that such prospects are constrained (and also enabled) by structures of power and that there are no ideal solutions or institutional mechanisms awaiting implementation. Multilevel governance becomes a means towards recognising the contestations and contradictions that embody political activity and the need to address them in a manner that is attentive to questions of social justice. While this may make for a messy arrangement, it would nonetheless be attentive to the concurrent needs of the community and of the international society.

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