

Universalizing the Universal: Rethinking Cosmopolitanism

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Cosmopolitanism seems to have lost its critical edge. While it used to be a critical ideology prescribing a more universal world, it now appears to merely describe the globalized world we live in. But has cosmopolitanism really lost touch with its radical roots? Could it not reconnect with its previous ability to challenge arbitrary exclusions? Revisiting demanding theories of democracy in a post-national light, James D. Ingram sketches the possible contours of a new *radical cosmopolitics*.

Reviewed: Ingram, James D., *Radical Cosmopolitics. The Ethics and Politics of Democratic Universalism*, “New Directions in Critical Theory”, dir. Allen, Amy, Columbia University Press, New York, 2013, 338p.

Cosmopolitanism is a deceiving philosophical ideal. While every political vision that ever aspired to universalism seems to have ended up betraying it badly, the world we live in has nonetheless turned, almost inadvertently, into a tight-knit web of interdependence relations mirroring in some respects the dream of a unified planet. Somewhat paradoxically, cosmopolitanism, which appeared for so long to be out of humankind’s reach, is all of a sudden knocking at our doors. And it finds us relatively unprepared to welcome it.

This paradox has fueled a certain sense of urgency in the field of political theory. Cosmopolitanism, not exactly a newcomer in the realm of political ideologies, nevertheless found itself regarded as in dire need to be quickly redefined, amended and updated in order to meet the modern challenges of a globalized world. Human rights, global justice and governance have been restored as major political and philosophical issues, and garner an ever-growing attention. This collective effort, dating back from the 1990s and led by prominent thinkers such as Marta Nussbaum or Jürgen Habermas, is to be commended. In James D. Ingram’s view, it suffers however from a fundamental misconception. Its elitist approach keeps it at bay from the democratic tradition. Attempting to overturn this original default, Ingram sketches in a stimulating book what a radical cosmopolitics in sync with democratic requirements would entail.

Cosmopolitanism, at a first glance, has often found itself guilty of offering a towering worldview that would be as ethically demanding as it is politically toothless. It too often put forward lofty ambitions that it did not have the means to meet. To reverse this well-established trend, Ingram suggests a shift in our practical approach of the universal. In normative political philosophy, cosmopolitanism should no longer be regarded as a derivative from a universal ethics

but rather as a political intervention. Cosmopolitanism should be redefined as *cosmopolitics*¹, that is, as an always localized and contextualized political disruption aiming at overcoming the inherited and often arbitrary boundaries that limit the scope of our moral concern.

To elaborate his own views on cosmopolitanism, Ingram splits his argument in two parts. First, he critically reviews what he calls the top-down approaches to cosmopolitanism. Then, he formulates what he considers to be a bottom-up cosmopolitanism that would avoid the pitfalls into which previous universal political ideologies have tended to fall, i.e. empty abstraction and hidden particularism.

Those are aptly illustrated, in his view, by the strengths and weaknesses of Kant's practical philosophy. Kant's pure ethics famously intends to be the very embodiment of the universal. After all, the categorical imperative commands to each moral being to act as if the maxim of his actions could be universalized. Cosmopolitanism from this perspective is almost equated with the proper application of morality. However, this transcendental principle calls for some specifications. For, as such, it is too indeterminate to guide any agency. If it is to steer anyone through the muddled world of hard moral choices, the categorical imperative has to be mediated through some 'impure' ethics. It should not only say *what* is to be done, but also *how* and *by whom*.

And, as soon as Kant tries to address this reproach, he flips in Ingram's view from an empty abstraction into an exclusive particularism to which he is surprisingly oblivious. While defining, for instance, who is entitled to be called a moral being, Kant notoriously marginalized women and non-European peoples, who were deemed too irrational to be fully autonomous and therefore unfit to participate in public life. Unaware of his internalization of his time's prejudice, Kant drew an unjustifiably narrow picture of the cosmopolitan world. According to Ingram, this tension is not just to be found in Kant's writing and should rather be considered as inherent to any form of universalism. Abstract and impartial universal principles need to be qualified in order to have some empirical repercussions on the practical world, but they cannot do so without running the risk of reintroducing some particularistic and therefore exclusionary elements in the political equation.

Even worse, Kant staunchly refused to seriously address the question of power imbalances. As his writings on the French Revolution testify, he firmly believed that the cosmopolitan agents *par excellence* were no other than the State sovereigns. Although he admired and welcomed – but strictly as a bystander – the birth of a new republican State at the heart of Europe, he also firmly condemned the overthrow of the French monarch by the Jacobins, for the people had, according to him, an absolute duty to obey its sovereign. The citizens are encouraged to speak their mind in order to enlighten the sovereign. But this liberty is confined to the realm of persuasion and should not be mistaken for a coercive tool. Sovereigns therefore *should* act as their citizens suggest them to, and in the long run it is supposed that they will, but they have no immediate reason to do so. The idealist shortcomings of this approach are almost too obvious to be stated. Why should those that benefit from injustices attempt to correct them? Relying on the powerful to curb their own abusive power seems to betray the egalitarianism on

¹ A neologism forged by Etienne Tassin in *Un monde commun. Pour une cosmo-politique des conflits*, Seuil, Paris, 2003.

which cosmopolitanism rests. This tension between the ambitious goals of cosmopolitanism and the modesty of the means allocated to it not solely a thing of the past. The school of thought promoting the idea of a ‘cosmopolitan democracy’ seems to be still believing this delusion. Addressing itself to the political elites, it appears sometimes to be more interested in convincing those in power to renounce some of their prerogatives, than in providing the oppressed and the powerless with a strategy to overcome their exclusion.

Could cosmopolitanism be looked at from a different angle? In Ingram’s view, it could and it should. In one of his most audacious and insightful exegetic suggestions, he invites us to consider for a moment Judith Butler as a cosmopolitan thinker. Usually taken to be a representative of both identity politics and postmodernism, Butler is not often associated with universalism. But Ingram nonetheless takes her feud with feminist thinker Catharine MacKinnon as a starting point for his reconstruction of a bottom-up, radically democratic cosmopolitanism.

If MacKinnon has been Butler’s favorite theoretical target for years, it is because of her totalizing exclusivity. According to Butler, MacKinnon downgrades any injustices that cannot be framed in terms of gender, eventually establishing “the woman” as a category so prevalent that it sidelines all other oppressed categories. Consequently, those who find themselves at the margins of gender distinction, such as the queer, or at the crossroads of several injustices, such as poor and/or black women, cannot help but see a false universalism in the totalizing category of the abstract “woman”. One might find Butler’s criticism unfair or exaggerated, but it is almost beyond the point, for Ingram’s interest in her lies more with the thrust of her argument than with its content. And from this viewpoint, the important point is that Butler puts universalism in motion, subtly pitting a universal claim against what she sees as a false universal. In Ingram’s words, it implies – at the ethical level – to move from universalism to what he calls a process of ‘universalization’. The underlying idea is that any claim to the universal should be submitted to a fierce negative critique that would expose the particularism hidden behind its empty abstraction. This does not rule out the possibility to make such claims, but it constantly forces those to be revised and reformulated.

Interestingly, a new school of thought has elaborated a very similar theoretical structure in order to redefine democracy on a more radical basis. Ingram sees this renewal of interest for a demanding democracy, one that is founded on the active involvement of the citizens, as the basis for a possible cosmopolitanism from below. Jacques Rancière, Etienne Balibar, Sheldon Wolin, Claude Lefort or Miguel Abensour, albeit belonging to a vast array of political traditions ranging from liberalism to anarchism and Marxism, have all highlighted the fact that democracy could never be reduced to its institutional features and to its embeddedness within the State. Democracy is rather, on this account, a political process that repeatedly disrupts the hegemonic order with the aim to expand egalitarianism. But this processual democracy has no available blueprint. It does not intend to superimpose a model onto reality. It rather struggles to permanently contest its own arbitrary limitations.

Mirroring the ethical move from universalism to a process of universalization, democracy has to turn into a constant search for its own democratization. Radical democracy is then better characterized by its negative critique of the power relations that impose and maintain exclusive discriminations. Cosmopolitanism, on this account, can be reconciled with both politics and democracy because it takes place wherever a contextualized disruption of the hegemonic order

occurs, allowing for marginalized voices to assess critically the political boundaries they are subjected to. In this sense, a radical *cosmopolitics* cannot satisfy itself with the pre-existing political spaces, such as the nation-state, and keeps bringing political contestation into new (cross-boundaries) spaces.

James Ingram sees the politics of the human rights as the best illustration of such a strategic redefinition of the cosmopolitan goals and instruments. In a striking formulation, he challenges McIntyre's polemical claims that human rights are as real as unicorns, by claiming that they rather compare to another animal, namely the mule. If they cannot reproduce by themselves and are to some extent artificially created, their reality cannot however be contested. But in order to grasp this truth, we must first revise our approach of human rights. Contrary to the assumptions of liberal tradition, Ingram argues, human rights do not protect democracy from itself; they rather secure its preconditions. Following this line of argument, a cosmopolitics of human rights should not be understood as a global policy working towards their worldwide implementation, but rather as local politics enabling excluded actors to make universal claims in order to reclaim their agency. Contrasting a humanitarian understanding of human rights – whose well-intentioned campaigns paradoxically tend to empower the powerful – with its more democratic understanding, according to which rights are created and acquired through struggles empowering the voiceless, Ingram revises the dominant reading of the Arendtian 'right to have rights'. Far from being an empty moral claim, this primary entitlement is, in his view, nothing less than an unconditional right to politics. To be truly universal and effective, human rights should be in the hands of their bearers, and not in those of international courts or of a community of states.

James D. Ingram's book is a treat. His arguments are insightful, rigorous (to the point that it may be repetitive sometimes) and well-documented throughout. Moreover, it accomplishes the rare feat of opening a dialogue between various philosophical traditions that seldom bother to respond to each other. Ingram moves smoothly from an analytical argument to its continental repudiation (or *vice versa*) and translates what is politically and philosophically at stake in a language accessible to all protagonists in the debate. For this achievement alone, the book ought to be commended. In spite of those qualities, we would however like to express a few reservations.

In a recent and excellent book, Loïs McNay² reproaches the radical thinkers with engaging into a misguided search for an ontological definition of the political that eventually takes them away from social consideration. According to her, the political is all too often taken to be socially weightless. To a certain extent, this argument could be applied to James Ingram's reasoning. Isn't he putting too much hope into the contestations to come from powerless agents? Isn't there a risk that those agents would have internalized their exclusion and would therefore consider the 'local' as the only protection against a threatening outside? In a way, Ingram preempts that criticism by calling in his conclusion for a "realism of possibility" that would reconcile a lucid assessment of the existing power relations with an impassionate rejection of any unjust *status quo*. Cosmopolitanism ought not to be naïve, but it ought in equal measure not to be content with the current state of the world. In spite of this acknowledgement, some questions

² McNay, Loïs, *The Misguided Search for the Political. Social Weightlessness in Radical Democratic Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014.

might still linger. For instance, is the analogy between human rights and the mule really consistent if we expect the former to be enacted and re-created almost *ex nihilo* by those who are supposedly deprived from it? Last but not least, one might be entitled to ask whether Ingram's suggestions are as *radical* as the book's title suggests. If cosmopolitanism is to be understood as a permanent challenge to unjustifiable exclusions, isn't it then quite remote from suggesting a massive overhaul of our current political system? If the unparalleled effort made by Ingram to bridge democratic theory and cosmopolitanism will surely be welcomed by many of his readers, it should remain up to them to decide whether the solution he provides is truly *radical*.

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