Book Symposium

Introduction to Symposium on *The Humble Cosmopolitan* by Luis Cabrera

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Abstract

This piece introduces a symposium on Luis Cabrera's *The Humble Cosmopolitan* (Oxford University Press, 2020), which is a comparative political theory text in three senses. First, it expands conventional conversation partners to include authors who are engaged in constructing their nation out of a colonial context, principally, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar is a scholar, politician, Chairman of the Constitutional Drafting Committee for the newly independent India, and Dalit activist ("Dalit" being the self-applied term for those outside of the Hindu caste hierarchy) and Madhavrao Sadashivrao Golwalkar, the historical thought leader of Hindu nationalism. Second, Cabrera reaches across the colonized-colonizer divide, engaging with intra-nation difference, enabling cross-time comparisons, broadening the moral and political meanings of, contributions to, and criticisms of cosmopolitan thinking. Third, using grounded normative theory, it is methodologically comparative, utilizing the author's own empirical research through over 150 interviews of activists and politicians from both Indian and European cosmopolitan and anti-cosmopolitan struggles.

Keywords

colonial – decolonial – nationalism – grounded normative theory – cosmopolitan

The cosmopolitan has a political problem. From conservatives he is attacked as supporting a view of justice that abandons what is morally right. From progressives he is criticized as holding a view of justice that supports the settler colonist's view of invasion as spreading "civilization" and resource extraction as "trade." The cosmopolitan fares no better in political theory, where communitarians reject her view of humanity as rights- and freedom- loving, in favor of recognizing humans realizing their humanity through local communities, religious communities, and families. Likewise, and yet with an opposite set of concerns, post-colonialists reject the cosmopolitan's view of liberal peace as a mask for arrogantly imposing an oppressive status quo in which millions in former colonies suffer from contemporary global economic inequality. The cosmopolitan is seemingly arrogantly oblivious to the role of her theory in upholding while concealing these injustices. Enter the humble cosmopolitan.

In *The Humble Cosmopolitan*, Luis Cabrera takes an analytic approach to engaging with the constructions and criticisms of liberal cosmopolitanism. He addresses accusations of liberal cosmopolitans as arrogantly dismissive of those whose moral views are shaped through attachments to people, faith community, or nation. Those attachments, he argues, arrogantly treat their approach as *unattached* to particular colonial and neo-colonial power in the world, and as the appropriate moral stance from which to assess all others. He offers instead a cosmopolitanism that maintains "an acknowledgement of the equal standing of others, an openness to input and challenge from them, and an intellectual modesty about the finality of one's own judgments" (p. 43). The false detachment of the liberal cosmopolitanism is replaced with institutional recognition that what maintains the equal standing of others is not always obvious and may be open to interpretation.

Even while using the analytic reasoning of many of the authors he criticizes, Cabrera broadens cosmopolitans' methodologies and empirical assumptions. This broadening is comparative in three senses and the remainder of this introduction will illustrate these. First, the project is comparative in that it expands conventional conversation partners to include authors who are engaged in constructing their nation out of a colonial context, principally, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar is a scholar, politician, Chairman of the Constitutional Drafting Committee for the newly independent India, and Dalit activist ("Dalit" being the self-applied term for those outside of the Hindu caste hierarchy) and Madhavrao Sadashivrao Golwalkar, the historical thought leader of Hindu nationalism.

Working with these scholars makes *The Humble Cosmopolitan* comparative in a second sense. Cabrera reaches across the colonized-colonizer divide, engaging with intra-nation difference, enabling cross-time comparisons, broadening the moral and political meanings of, contributions to, and

criticisms of cosmopolitan thinking. A third further significance of *The Humble Cosmopolitan*'s methodologically comparative approach is that Cabrera does his own empirical research through over 150 interviews of activists and politicians from both Indian and European cosmopolitan and anti-cosmopolitan struggles.

By reading the cannon to include politically engaged scholar-activists, by working on a timeless question across time periods and places, and by conducting empirical research across contexts, *The Humble Cosmopolitan* is a work of comparative and grounded normative theory and an excellent model for how empirical methods can keep any political theorist humble relative to her assumptions. *The Humble Cosmopolitan* focusses on humility as a political virtue; moreover, Cabrera exhibits humility as a virtue in political theory: he defines and utilizes grounded normative theory to guide and analyze his empirical research.

The empirical sites for developing humble cosmopolitanism are three-fold. First, the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) utilizes the UN system for supporting human rights in a way that is seemingly consistent with liberal cosmopolitan expectations. Second, the BJP, the Hindu Nationalist Party, and its allies resist the NCDHR's approach of reaching outside of India for cosmopolitan allies. Cabrera engages with both the scholarship supporting these views (as noted above) and interviews with those engaged in these politics. Third, Cabrera studies anti-European Union arguments in the United Kingdom (the UK Independence Party) and conducts interviews with those knowledgeable about Turkish-EU relations. These empirical inquiries make the work more "comparative" if we understand that word to capture a broad commitment to identifying and destabilizing the empirical assumptions behind our theories and to revealing the limitations of certain ways of theorizing for addressing these limitations in order to illustrate the point (see Ackerly & Bajpai, 2017).

Thus, through working across traditions to explore the available contributions of cosmopolitanism and through working through politics and difference within political perspectives of those utilizing and challenging the various modes of cosmopolitanism to advance their ends, Cabrera offers us *the Humble Cosmopolitan*, a political view of cosmopolitanism that profoundly and carefully engages with objections that cosmopolitanism has sustained within conflicts today. As the contributors to this symposium demonstrate, this engagement is both timely and timeless.

Given the timely and timeless problem of inclusive democracy and justice and the potential for democratically endorsed oppression of groups outside and within a democratic state, each of the contributors celebrates Cabrera's

exposition of Ambedkar as one of the important thinkers on this topic. In her comments, Cricket Keating both goes back to the time and struggles in which Ambedkar's ideas were forged and forward to ideas of two scholars, Natasha Behl (2019) and Manuela Picq (2018), who also use grounded normative theory. Their methods lead them to different conclusions, ones that make more of locally generated ideas of how communities can be an important institutional part of achieving democratic citizenship with human rights of all and without arrogance.

Jaby Mathew picks up on this question by clarifying the political meaning of humility that Cabrera develops. His concern, however, is that Ambedkar, and consequently Cabrera, miss the value of the daily experience of humility and democratic citizenship that is possible if the institutional proposals focused not only on national (Ambedkar) and global (Cabrera) democratic citizenship, but also village level democratic citizenship. More pointedly, Fred Lee is less confident that humble cosmopolitanism can accommodate claims of justice and injustice coming from subnational groups. As he interprets Cabrera, "trans-state democracy for Cabrera defends individual rights and worth against aggressive claims of sovereignty and nationality." Yet, Lee worries that Cabrera misses the possibilities that subaltern nationalisms, including the nationalist claims of BJP-Hindu nationalists, are in fact based on a justice claim.

Behl picks up on the promise of Cabrera's methodology – grounded normative theory. Her concern is not with the methodology, but with Cabrera's limited use of two of its functions: expanding the set of views to be considered and challenging the theorist's own assumptions. She asks, "How would the analysis change if the author acknowledged different intellectual histories of citizenship rooted in different epistemic communities?" Second, she asks if Cabrera sufficiently analyzes the import of his analysis about gendered violence. "What if Dalit women's epistemic authority regarding their lived experience of unequal citizenship was privileged to inform the theoretical assumptions and justifications of the book?"

Taken together these contributors explore the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the book. They also leave much of the book for readers to discover themselves and provide a powerful set of framing inquiries that will enable readers to bring much to and to take away even more from *The Humble Cosmopolitan*.

References

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