Varieties of Cosmopolitanism

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Quite recently a group of well-known social scientists called for a radical change in the outlook of their disciplines and the reformulation of the humanities according to an interdisciplinary methodological cosmopolitanism. Led by sociologist like Ulrich Beck and Saskia Sassen, by political scientists like Thomas Pogge and Charles Beitz, by philosophers like Peter Singer and Sheila Benhabib or universalists like Jürgen Habermas, they challenge the assumption that nation states are the most important arenas of politics, the granting of rights, claims of justice and solidarity. Under many different labels, these authors identify practices of all kinds—sub-, supra-, cross- or post-national actions—that subvert the territorial limits, the functions, the efficiency and the legitimacy of the state. Cosmopolitanism, then, is offered as the key to a whole bundle of so far unsolved problems of a political, normative or theoretical kind.

Of course, most social scientists have an associative understanding of the term, and most of these associations are critical and constructive at the same time: “citizens of the world” are against local, particularistic identities, against closed borders, against Western superiority or against a “global apartheid.” In this sense, cosmopolitanism works as an antidote to nationalism and offers a useful normative complement to economic globalisation; it promises to provide an adequate framework for intellectuals, including moral standards, to evaluate the effects of globalisation in terms of justice or/and equality. This is clearly the attraction of the current debate: cosmopolitanism offers an interdisciplinary formula that gives coherence to the social sciences beyond arbitrary postmodernism. It combines normative assumptions and real world analysis.

This broad appeal, nevertheless, poses the question if one concept can have so many meanings and still remain a useful theoretical device. To answer this question, I will dissect different layers of the concept of cosmopolitanism and map these layers to real world trends, which are playing out in our times. Doing this, I am not primarily interested in philosophical justifications but in the roles which different concepts of cosmopolitanism could play in reforming international institutions and world politics. First I will sketch the background of the debate in order to underline that the entry of cosmopolitanism into the social science debate is not at all self-evident, but is driven by changes in the international environment. In my second point I will present and set into relation four
competing or complementary understandings of cosmopolitanism. My concluding part will evaluate these conceptions against the background of recent global events.

**Part One**

To start with, sociologists could be surprised that they are offered an idea which is much older than any of sociology’s standard concepts—much older than the conception of social structure, of institutions, of the individual, or the very concept of society; a concept that has a very complicated, politically burdened history. In fact, the idea of cosmopolitanism is more than 2000 years older than sociology, which as a science emerged only during the late 19th century. Also the modern debate on cosmopolitanism was for a long time carried out mainly in philosophical periodicals like the Journal for Social Philosophy or Metaethics. This seemed only natural, since the modern understanding of the term was instructed by Kant’s moral philosophy and philosophy of law and remained largely in the domain of ethics.

Political cosmopolitanism, which reaches even further back, to the old Greeks, was hardly noticed by social scientists who conceived of their prime units of analysis as nation-states. At the same time it was known too well as a code name for deadly political accusations in Stalinist Eastern Europe. The script for the post-World War II show trials was composed of characteristic phrases like “unpatriotic groups of theatre critiques,” “persons without identity,” “passportless wanderers,” or simply: “rootless cosmopolitans without a fatherland” (see Judt 2005: 183). The East–west confrontation during the Cold War was not an opportune time for thinking in global categories—on neither side. In the West Roosevelt’s “One-Worldism” gave way to Truman’s provincialism. The United Nations, the most far-reaching institutionalisation of cosmopolitan ideas until this point in history, were still constructed in the spirit of an antifascist consensus; a few years later, the comprehensive scheme of collective security, as envisioned in Chapter VII of the UN Charter, was undercut by bilateral or regional alliances, and it became difficult to find agreement in the Security Council (Roberts & Kingsbury 1991: 29ff). On both sides of the Iron Curtain, cosmopolitanism was a minority sport of pacifists or scientists who thought that science has a duty to unite the world or that only a world government could guarantee progress and peace. Nevertheless, despite the disenchantment of the world federalist with the state-centred UN system, as Inis rightly remarks, “the expansion of the organization has completed the process of eliminating European parochialism of international institutions, making