CHAPTER 1

Cosmopolitanism: The Fortunes of a Word

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The idea of cosmopolitanism does not have a linear history. As the idea changed over time, it expressed the varied needs, experiences, aspirations and agencies of different social groups. The original Greek meaning of the word cosmopolitan indicated someone considered as a citizen of the world, happy to observe different cultures and religions. This meaning regained prominence in sixteenth century Europe, but is now, in the twenty-first century, confronted with the idea of a migrant capable of playing with multiple identities, simultaneously keeping roots and borrowing from different cultures, engaging with transformation and hybridism. Cosmopolitanism from the top, connected to a global financial elite with its own life style, contrasts with cosmopolitanism from below, which is linked to solidarity between different minorities and disadvantaged populations.

Certain historical periods of economic expansion favour openness and exchange, while the rise of insecurity triggers protectionism and isolationism. European expansion connected different parts of the world, but the practices of imperialism and colonialism uprooted and devastated native populations in other continents, creating constraints on exchange. Modern globalization was promoted by western powers that benefited from the international division of labour, but the transfer of knowledge and technology has been reshaping international economic terms. The improvement of living conditions in Asia and, more recently, in Africa, has contributed to the reduction of world inequality, only to be followed by increased inequality within many countries. Precarious employment and limited possibilities of a better life for the majority of the population produce a problematic labour market even before the impact of robotics.

The vicissitudes of a cosmopolitan outlook are part of historical uncertainty and can be linked to long-term economic trends. Cosmopolitanism, in its different meanings, is also linked to historical conditions and cultural changes. It is these conditions, and their effect in framing possibilities, that will be addressed in this chapter, complemented by a reflection on the adversary constraints, particularly nationalism.
Self-Criticism

Cosmopolitan is a noun used in Europe in the sixteenth century to describe a person able to move between countries and regions, happy to observe a variety of customs, feeling at home in different parts of the world.\(^1\) It resulted from the European overseas expansion, which led to ruthless conquest, political dominion and economic exploitation, but also to early reflection on otherness and identity. The invention by Thomas More (1478–1535) of the noun utopia, meaning simultaneously no-place and good-place, allowed the author to imagine a distant island where an alternative society had developed. Reflection on social inequality, the eradication of poverty, shared communal wealth, political representation, the exclusion of private property and limiting the use of money to foreign trade, was an innovative outcome of the discovery of new worlds, new peoples, new customs and new political regimes.\(^2\) It expressed a crucial moment in which Europe was confronted with its own past and its future; *Utopia* bridged the abyss between different times and places.\(^3\)

The letters of Christopher Columbus, the reports on the voyage of Vasco da Gama, and the travel accounts of Americo Vespucci had been circulating in Europe for some time when Thomas More wrote his fiction in 1516.\(^4\) In the following decades, maritime trade ended the isolation of the New World, established links between Europe and the Far-East, and reinforced connections between Europe, Africa and Asia. The circulation of commodities and people meant new forms of political and economic dominion, but also the development of diplomatic relations, the collection of information and the formulation of a new order of knowledge in which Europe fashioned itself as the centre of the world.\(^5\) It was the constant gathering of information on systems of winds and currents, geography, botany, zoology, mineralogy, peoples, languages, religions, political regimes, defensive capacities, commodities, and markets that

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