

The Cosmopolitan Predicament

In 2008, then Senator Barack Obama made what must surely be an unprecedented declaration for someone with serious designs on the U.S. presidency. To a crowd of cheering Berliners, he announced: “I speak to you not as a candidate for president, but as a citizen, a proud citizen of the United States *and a fellow citizen of the world*” (italics added). In this echo of President John F. Kennedy’s famous “Ich bin ein Berliner” speech, Barack Obama went beyond Cold War-inspired solidarity and proclaimed himself a cosmopolitan.

A set of ethical and political ideas with a pedigree dating back to Greek and Roman antiquity, cosmopolitanism comes to us as a belief in the fundamental unity of the entire human race. This idea was revived by the *philosophes* of the European Enlightenment (most notably by Immanuel Kant) who took the existence of their own urbane “republic of letters” to foreshadow a future era of polite civilization, commerce, and global peace. By the twentieth century, however, cosmopolitanism nearly disappeared as a serious intellectual, let alone political, position. “Great powers”-based realism instead dominated the mood of politics and the mode of analysis in an era defined by raging nationalisms, the trauma of world wars, and a Cold War where competing superpower “internationalisms” vied for global ascendancy through proxy conflicts and the threat of mutually assured destruction.

However, with the collapse of Soviet Communism, Kantian dreams of perpetual peace once again began to stir the imaginations and the rhetoric of political leaders, while the emergence of “globalization” as the master concept in the social sciences allowed cosmopolitanism to regain currency within the academy. But in the process, cosmopolitanism also refashioned itself, moving beyond political theory, its conventional home, and ranging widely across anthropology, cultural studies, literary criticism, legal studies, and social history. New, more or less reflexive cosmopolitanisms have since proliferated, preoccupied first with squaring the circle of abstract universalism by emphasizing respect for the particularity of human diversity, and second, with expanding the boundaries of the circle to include (if not to favor) those for whom cosmopolitanism is not a lifestyle choice, but the tragic involuntary condition of the refugee or otherwise dispossessed.

The revived appeal of cosmopolitanism has not occurred without challenge. Initial enthusiasms for a postnational age of humanitarianism, human rights, and global governance today appear premature, if not misplaced, in light of growing global economic inequality; the horrors of Bosnia, Rwanda, and Darfur; and religiously inspired terrorism. Meanwhile, cosmopolitanism has come under repeated attack from a variety of intellectual perspectives; realists, communitarians, liberal nationalists, multiculturalists,

and postmoderns have each fired their “salvos of dubiety” across the bow of cosmopolitanism’s academic advocates.¹

Given the renewed interest in cosmopolitanism over the past two decades, it is not surprising that there has been a veritable tidal wave of writing on the topic, with nearly every scholarly journal dedicating space to it in recent years. Indeed, one might be tempted to ask whether there is really a need for yet another journal issue on the topic?

To this point, however, most conventional accounts of cosmopolitanism’s revival have primarily concerned themselves with showcasing its leading thinkers and their critics, both of whom are understandably preoccupied with whether cosmopolitanism offers us sufficient grounds for a universal ethics that does justice to pluralism and difference, or for providing an adequate rationale for reconceiving the Westphalian political and legal order based on the primacy of national sovereignty. Missing from standard accounts is any focused consideration of the social and cultural situation that has provoked the revival of cosmopolitan thinking and feeling in the first place.

It is the aim of this issue of *The Hedgehog Review* to examine the cultural significance of cosmopolitanism’s recent revival. This will mean retracing some of the more familiar terrain of contemporary debates, and we are pleased to feature contributions by leading cosmopolitan political philosophers Seyla Benhabib and Kwame Anthony Appiah, along with critical appraisals by political sociologist Anthony D. Smith and American historian Johann N. Neem. It will also mean reconsidering another familiar aspect of the story of modern cosmopolitanism: its complicated genealogy, especially as it has developed out of, and is still arguably dependent upon European culture and history. Providing two provocative essays on these dimensions are Renaissance historian John M. Headley and Dutch cultural critic Rob Riemen. Ultimately, the goal of this issue is to situate the renewed interest in, and the controversies over cosmopolitanism in the less familiar light of a larger cultural predicament to which the phenomenon of cosmopolitanism itself gives testimony. To this end, we include essays by sociologist Joshua J. Yates and world historian William H. McNeill.

Taken together, these essays show that the significance of cosmopolitanism is not simply reducible to the contested viability or efficacy of its stated aspirations. Rather, we catch a glimpse of how its cultural resonance has in a certain sense become inescapable given the fact that humans are increasingly living amid the tensions of reinvigorated aspirations for a unified world, on the one hand, and the seemingly intractable disparities and discontinuities of globalization, on the other. Cosmopolitanism continues to inspire, in other words, if not mainly in terms of a coherent ethic or political project, then as a description of the ethical and political *quandaries* inherent in a globalizing world. Paraphrasing Foucault, we might say that cosmopolitanism has become a term we somehow cannot do without, and for this reason alone, it requires sustained interrogation.

—T.H.R.

¹ Derek Heater, *World Citizenship: Cosmopolitan Thinking and its Opponents* (New York: Continuum, 2002) 63.