Cosmopolitanism and the Enlightenment

As we face new global challenges – from climate change to the international political order – the need to re-examine the historical roots of cosmopolitanism and liberal principles on a global scale has become increasingly central to the political conversation. *Cosmopolitanism and the Enlightenment* brings together leading scholars in cultural history, the history of ideas, and global politics in order to reassess the complexity of cosmopolitanism during the Enlightenment and its various interpretations over time. Through a fresh and revisionist perspective, the volume explores issues of universalism and cultural diversity, the idea of civilization, race, gender, empire, colonialism, global inequality, national patriotism, international and civil conflict, and other forms of political discourse, challenging the simple negative stereotype that the Enlightenment was inevitably hierarchical and Eurocentric. This timely intervention into the debate about the legacy of the Enlightenment highlights both the plurality and the continuing relevance of enlightened cosmopolitanism to contemporary global concerns.

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For Anthony Pagden

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Preface

Over the last few years, cosmopolitanism has reemerged as central to political conversation, and the analysis of its history and meaning has attracted work from a widening array of disciplines. This interest is, no doubt, related to the new global challenges faced by humanity, from climate change to pandemics, but also to persistent problems with the global international order: most notably, the difficulty of guaranteeing human rights everywhere within the existing political structures and the crisis of liberal principles in the face of the rising forces of nationalism and populism.[1] With this new surge of scholarship and public attention, definitions of cosmopolitanism – the idea of world citizenship, as opposed to merely local or national identities – have oscillated between close attention to its intellectual roots in the European Enlightenment and attempts to offer a more flexible concept adapted to its global dimensions in different historical periods and contexts. For some, the ancient Stoic roots of the concept are still highly relevant, as well as how they evolved in early modern Europe to articulate an ideal of perpetual peace, progressive federalism, and international civility (a formulation usually associated with Kant's idea of Enlightenment as the coming of age of mankind). In this analysis, the ideas of humanity, human civilization, and human rights that emerged from Europe's historical experience underpin the modern idea of a genuinely global cosmopolis, often expressed in the idiom of natural and international law in connection to European imperial discourses.[2] For others, however, this view is excessively Eurocentric, and the various cosmopolitan practices observed, for example, in the supposedly uncosmopolitan nineteenth century (because of its strong nationalist and colonialist tendencies) suggest the need to look beyond a single intellectual lineage, so as to understand how

[1] See Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Cosmopolitan Tradition: A Noble But Flawed Ideal* (Cambridge, MA; London: The Belknap Press, 2019), for an example of how liberal thinkers seek to handle new political challenges within an international order that they perceive as inevitably dominated by nation-states.

[2] Anthony Pagden, *The Burdens of Empire, 1539 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

cultural differences were accommodated in very different historical contexts, under the guidance of an idea of common humanity.[3] From this revisionist perspective, Jürgen Osterhammel has recently suggested the need to go beyond the Enlightenment and its legacy in order to write a new history of cosmopolitanism that is nonlinear, multiversal, and polycentric.[4] There is, of course, a danger in pursuing this approach that by simply focusing on how, in various historical contexts, humans dealt with the distinction between native and aliens – something that is both universal and unavoidable – we lose sight of the most distinctive element of cosmopolitanism: the effort to imagine and empower a global community, moral and political, firmly rooted in an idea of common humanity.

What seems clear is that the definition of this concept remains both relevant and problematic, and that its association with the European Enlightenment requires further clarification. An essential starting point, then, is to look once more at what the cosmopolitanism of the Enlightenment was actually about.[5] An overly facile critique of "the Enlightenment and its legacy" may, more often than not, rely on a negative stereotype that does not do full justice to how global, plural, and contextually located the Enlightenment actually was.

This volume of essays, which was conceived in critical dialogue with the work of Anthony Pagden on the subject, proposes to address these questions at the intersection of three perspectives: the history of ideas, the new cultural history of empire and encounters, and global politics. The concern with constructing, or deconstructing, an intellectual genealogy for modern cosmopolitan ideas is less useful, we contend, than interrogating the concept of cosmopolitanism together with the concept of Enlightenment. By expanding the actors and contexts traditionally associated with thinking and practicing cosmopolitanism during the long eighteenth century, these essays make a bold contribution to what has traditionally been a more top-down, insular, and ultimately unsatisfying approach to what can be seen as a critical concept for our times.

[3] Valeska Huber and Jan C. Jansen, "Dealing with Difference: Cosmopolitanism in the Nineteenth-Century World of Empires," *Humanity: An international Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism and Development*, 12 (2021): 39–46.

[4] J. Osterhammel, "Cosmopolitanism as Doctrine, Attitude and Practice," *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism and Development*, 12 (2021): 103–115.

[5] For a traditional account, see, for example, Thomas J. Schlereth, *The Cosmopolitan Ideal in Enlightenment Thought: Its Form and Function in the Ideas of Franklin, Hume, and Voltaire, 1694–1790* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977). A new emphasis on cultural practices is apparent in Margartet Jacob, *Strangers Nowhere in the World: The Rise of Cosmopolitanism in Early Modern Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006). Also relevant is the recent assessment of early modern cosmopolitan ideas by Leigh Penman, *The Lost History of Cosmopolitanism: The Early Modern Origins of the Intellectual Ideal* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

The book's extensive Introduction revisits the concepts of cosmopolitanism and Enlightenment by taking account of recent scholarship and debates. It highlights the difficulties posed by various definitions – in particular the need to disentangle cosmopolitanism from multiculturalism – and suggests the need to balance the analysis of cosmopolitan ideals with their local contexts. It also argues for a more plural and global Enlightenment, one not restricted solely to tracing intellectual trajectories of leading actors, albeit without denying the importance of ideas and their legacies. After considering what may be specific to the early modern European strain of cosmopolitanism, the Introduction discusses cosmopolitan practices and traditions outside of Europe, cosmopolitanism from the perspectives of race, gender, and in colonial societies, and the complex interactions between cosmopolitanism and politics.

Individual chapters explore these topics in greater detail. Daniel Carey (Chapter 1) highlights the centrality of the concept of natural law as the basis for a universal rational consensus and explores how John Locke, one of the leading thinkers at the roots of the European Enlightenment, sought to handle the fundamental problem of cultural diversity. In particular, he emphasizes the challenge of interpreting irrational beliefs and customs from the perspective that ideas were not innate, and that a rational understanding of natural law had to be historically constructed, notably through education. This opens a persistent problem, defining who counts as cosmopolitan, and in this respect, Locke's perspective was fairly pessimistic, because to him – and to many who followed his ideas in subsequent centuries – only a few individuals living in certain societies seemed to have achieved a sufficient degree of rationality.

In Chapter 2, Joan-Pau Rubiés argues for the need to consider the early modern genealogy of the cosmopolitan ideal, too often associated simplistically with the Enlightenment. By analyzing the particular historical conditions of the period, he concludes that there was no simple thread leading from the revival of Stoic ideas to the *Encyclopédie* and to Kant. Instead, he identifies a Renaissance cosmopolitan tradition that functioned both as a transnational ideal of travel and learning within Europe, and as a global ideal of commerce that assumed the moral unity of mankind. He also emphasizes, however, the impact of travel writing in shaping perceptions of cultural diversity, arguing that the definition of human nature through empirical diversity is distinctive of European cosmopolitanism, despite some skepticism about the capacity of human reason to reach a universal moral understanding in all circumstances. Rubiés concludes that this opened a paradox never fully resolved: whether the "universal spirit" of the cosmopolitan ethos was not inevitably tied to a particular notion of civilization or even, at a deeper level, to some particular language and cultural system at the expense of others. In this respect, early modern cosmopolitanism was inevitably hierarchical, internally biased toward urban elites with the kind of education and experience that allowed them to

participate in the Republic of Letters. Yet, it was also externally associated with a new idea of polite civilization whose values and institutions were often culturally specific, so that the role of non-European cultures as partakers of universal values was increasingly (and perhaps unnecessarily) marginalized.

Girolamo Imbruglia's contribution (Chapter 3) addresses the cosmopolitan thought of Denis Diderot, chief editor of the *Encyclopédie* and one of the key figures of the French Enlightenment. He considers, in particular, his contribution to Raynal's *Histoire des deux Indes*, a philosophical history of the European colonial empires in which he expressed some of his critique of colonial oppression from a radical anthropological perspective imbued with materialism and atheism. Contrary to any simple idea that the cosmopolitanism of the Enlightenment relied on an idealization of mankind's rational faculties, Diderot proposed that in order to account for the genealogy of moral and political norms, it was necessary to acknowledge that in human history, irrationality and the "monstrous" element played crucial roles. His analysis of the monstrous tendencies underlying the motivations of conquerors, traders, and missionaries in the New World reveals the Enlightenment's capacity for a critique of European civilization and, consequently, the impetus to construct a new kind of politics that targeted untrammeled commercial greed, religious superstition, and especially political despotism. In this respect, despite an apparently pessimistic anthropological premise, Diderot also expressed the Enlightenment belief in the capacity for universal progress through cultural and political change.

Neil Safier (Chapter 4) reassesses the cosmopolitan elements within the natural history, geography, and ethnography of the Enlightenment and, in particular, the often invisible cross-cultural elements that made it possible. Against any idea that the new global horizons of the period were simply a European creation through the combined efforts of empirical travelers and armchair historians and cartographers, he suggests that emblematic compilers such as Jean-Baptiste Bourguignon d'Anville or Alexander von Humboldt actually served as interpreters of multiple layers of local knowledge. In this respect, eighteenth-century naturalists who connected the frontiers of the New World or the Pacific to a European "republic of knowledge" often struggled with their universalist aspirations, as they brought to their practice inherent notions of difference and hierarchy. The very attempt to generate a vision of the world potentially free from cultural prejudices, proposed by the philosopher Kant in his response to Georg Forster's account of the peoples of the Pacific, is symptomatic of the increasing awareness that the knowledge generated by European observers was deeply and inevitably subjective.

While cartographers and naturalists represent one end of the spectrum, Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra's essay (Chapter 5) addresses the issue of local knowledge from the opposite end, by considering the alternative sources produced by

nonelite actors in the Spanish and Portuguese colonies. Despite the difficulty of locating written documentation giving expression to the potentially cosmopolitan vision of Indigenous, Mestizos, free Blacks, and slaves, Cañizares-Esguerra makes an argument for emphasizing the very fact that these scribal cultures existed, taking as his examples the many religious cofradias found in colonial cities across the Atlantic and the confessional writings of female *beatas.* Although previous scholarship has already noted the active participation of Native communities in the Spanish courts of justice, the documents produced by the communities of free Blacks and slaves in Rio, Montevideo, and Havana show a wider range of political concerns, posing the question of why the narrative of Enlightenment cosmopolitanism has been constructed as an almost exclusively white European discourse of universal fraternity in opposition to these nonelite local communities of scribal knowledge. A fresh analysis of these early modern traditions of the local and subaltern that emerged in imperial contexts across the colonial Atlantic reveals their awareness of global secular and religious geographies, and suggests not only that these views can be profitably integrated into a broader understanding of cosmopolitanism but also that the resulting panorama is far less elitist and exclusionary.

Besides being primarily white and European, the cosmopolitanism of the Enlightenment was also predominantly male. As recent scholarship has shown, women played an important role in various Enlightenment-era institutions, from salons to academies, and were especially prominent in the realms of politics, literature, and print. And yet, women were also a fundamentally important discursive category during this period, which poses the question of how a cosmopolitan history and science of humankind could be constructed that was genuinely universal, while men remained, by default, the norm. Silvia Sebastiani (Chapter 6) analyzes this question with reference to various writers of the Scottish and French Enlightenments, emphasizing the paradox that changes in women's status were represented as a crucial feature of the transition from savagery to civilization. If civilization was, among other things, a process toward cosmopolitanism, then the more cosmopolitan societies were also those in which the status of women was the highest. This vision, though Eurocentric since it was modeled on European social change, offered an avenue for the positive valuation of female agency. It was nevertheless constrained by a contrary discourse with an ancient pedigree: the fear that progress could be reversed, turning "civilizing femininity" into "decadent effeminacy." The Enlightenment discourse on the progress of civilization, thus, remained deeply ambivalent and, as Sebastiani argues, produced an anxiety that sanctioned societal elements designed to keep the female sex under control.

The tension between an ideal of world citizenship and the patriotism fostered by competing European nation-states was possibly the most

fundamental contradiction within the cosmopolitan culture of the Enlightenment and has remained a crucial issue in most subsequent formulations. In her essay, Melissa Calaresu (Chapter 7) explores this tension with reference to the example of a Neapolitan man of letters – Petro Napoli Signorelli – who spent many years abroad in Madrid. His direct participation in literary circles outside Naples, and the way he was required to negotiate various competing national agendas while writing a universal history of theater, opens up a subtle distinction between identifying as a cosmopolitan and living a cosmopolitan life. It also suggests that universalism and Neoclassicism were not equivalent to cultural homogeneity. On the contrary, the cultural variety of the European past projected itself toward the future and, for example, encouraged resistance to the universalization of French norms.

Like several authors, Sankar Muthu (Chapter 8) considers the issue of cosmopolitanism in relation to inequality, domination, and resistance, important concerns for many early modern thinkers. However, within the Enlightenment discourse of cosmopolitanism, the relevant human interactions must not simply be associated with imperial structures, but rather analyzed in relation to global commerce and global sociability. Muthu's discussion of the antislavery writings of the Afro-British Quobna Ottobah Cugoano in dialogue with the thought of Immanuel Kant shows how such global connections could both erode the principles of common humanity and provide a basis for resisting domination.

Finally, David Armitage (Chapter 9) also takes as his starting point Kant's notion of "unsocial sociability" at the heart of the cosmopolitan impulse, a force that compelled humans to seek peace even as they experienced destructive forms of competition. In this respect, as Kant made clear, the pursuit of peace and social justice through civilized values was a progressive effort that required accepting the reality of conflict. Armitage argues that modern cosmopolitan thinking has until relatively recently often avoided reflecting on this conflictual element, focusing instead (and rather idealistically) on the construction of a global *polis* by seeking to overcome nationalism, tribalism, and other forms of divisive prejudice. A reflection on what the cosmopolitan ideal might have to say about civil war, as opposed to international conflicts, offers a new angle in the project of placing cosmopolitan politics in a more realist setting. In particular, a reassessment of Vattel and other eighteenth-century thinkers who explored whether the law of nations should regulate civil conflicts helps us appreciate the extent to which contemporary discussions of humanitarian intervention and "global civil war" are connected to earlier debates of the Enlightenment.

In an Afterword (Chapter 10) to this volume, Anthony Pagden, one of the most sophisticated interpreters of the Enlightenment as fundamentally secular, philosophical, and cosmopolitan, offers a response to the various contributions

of this volume that insists upon the contemporary relevance of these ideas. While the Enlightenment must be interpreted in its contextual complexity, Pagden argues that it also remains constitutive of modern liberal values; and in this respect, "secularism" amounts to a defense of human rights independent of any religious or local communal values. The fact that "the belief in the possibility of a universal code of moral conduct" had, in Europe, religious and imperial roots, or that it has been tainted by racial exploitation and other discriminatory practices, is not, in this view, a good enough reason to dismiss its validity. One of the paradoxes posed by the cosmopolitanism of the Enlightenment is that, although it was largely the product of a world of religious universalism and competing empires, it came to articulate the first comprehensive critique of that very world by espousing religious tolerance, the ideal of universal human rights rooted in nature, and commercial and federative forms of cosmopolitan thinking.

As we have seen, the concept of cosmopolitanism has traditionally been associated with the idea of a global community of rational human beings with shared moral values, whose political expression, to the extent that it can be articulated, involves universal rights, and this definition is generally assumed and developed by the contributors of this volume. However, we have also identified an important issue in relation to who defines these values in a world of inequalities and from where. The problem is particularly poignant when seen from the periphery of a world globalized through European colonialism. As argued, for example, by Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, in the process of defining a cosmopolitan vision, the European Enlightenment paradoxically constructed the notion of the parochial and the local in places like Latin America, notwithstanding their own universalistic aspirations and without acknowledging the extent to which these ideological constructions were – in the Europe of letters, academies, salons, and universities – also localized. Neil Safier, in turn, suggests that the connections created through trade and travel have a constructive value in terms of articulating the values and imagination of a global humanity even when no specific cosmopolitan ideology of global rights is present. In this context, it may be argued that incorporating the analysis of various forms of "local globalism," such as those explored by these authors, offers a necessary corrective to a Eurocentric narrative. We have, therefore, invited individual authors to explore these issues within their contributions through a critical use of the concepts of cosmopolitanism and Enlightenment. At the same time, as we argue in the Introduction to the volume, we understand that it is important to reflect on the difference between, on the one hand, the existence of forms of cultural accommodation and imperial universalism in different cultures and, on the other hand, the articulation of an explicit cosmopolitan ideal with specific moral contents based on the notion of universal human rights, one whose pursuit, in turn, requires

envisioning and constructing a global political order. The suggestion is that while any such vision must be concerned with avoiding the perpetuation of an inherited Eurocentric bias, the definition of universal rights is, nonetheless, incompatible with a strong form of cultural relativism.

Without seeking to espouse a single position within what remains a lively debate, this collection highlights both the plurality and the continuing relevance of enlightened cosmopolitanism. Indeed, it suggests that, contrary to the simple stereotype that one often encounters of the legacy of the Enlightenment as inevitably hierarchical and Eurocentric, a fresh reassessment of these very contradictions in the face of issues of cultural diversity, race, colonialism, gender, global inequality, national patriotism, and other forms of political discourse offers numerous insights that are particularly valuable to discussions of the cosmopolitan ideal – and what it means, in practice, to be a global citizen – in the twenty-first century.

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