

Adorno, Solidarity, Cosmopolitanism

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In “Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch” (1795), Immanuel Kant famously claimed that relations between the diverse peoples of the earth had advanced to such a degree that “a violation of rights in *one* part of the world is felt *everywhere*.”¹ This claim, and Kant’s work on cosmopolitanism more broadly, have proven extremely influential for contemporary theorists of cosmopolitanism, many of whom have seen the fall of the Iron Curtain and the rise of globalization as an opportunity to expand and deepen human rights and the kinds of supranational political institutions that might enforce them.² Indeed, in an echo of Kant fit for the twenty-first century, Benhabib has claimed that cosmopolitanism has become “one of the keywords of our times.”³

Yet is not—or *cannot*—cosmopolitanism be something more than a *keyword*, a google-corrected search item absent-mindedly scanned over in between the viewing of cat videos, pirated media, and whatever else one watches on the internet? That is, one of the most common criticisms of contemporary, Kant-inspired cosmopolitanism, is that even after over two hundred years it remains so shallow, so rarified and bloodless, when compared to the guts of our personal and familial associations, or even imaginary constructs such as ‘the nation.’ As Barber has noted: “the idea cosmopolitanism offers little or nothing for the human psyche to fasten on.”⁴ While its defenders have tried to show how cosmopolitanism is interwoven with our lived, daily experiences in complex ways that undermine any stable opposition between national and international communities,⁵ thus insisting that the particular things upon which the human psyche might fasten are themselves already cosmopolitan, these same defenders often overlook the degree to which their own positions as world citizens are expressions of the unequal power relations that structure both national and international communities.⁶ It is in part this failure to appreciate the gravity of these inequalities that has rendered cosmopolitans politically suspect, even prior to Kant.

¹ Immanuel Kant, “Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch,” in *Political Writings*, ed. H.S. Reiss, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 107-8.

² Daniele Archibugi, “Cosmopolitan Democracy,” *Debating Cosmopolitanism*, ed. Daniele Archibugi (London: Verso, 2003); Connor Gearty, “Human Rights: The Necessary Quest for Foundations,” in *The Meanings of Rights: The Philosophy and Social Theory of Human Rights* eds. Costas Douzinas and Connor Gearty (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Jürgen Habermas, “The Postnational Constellation and the Future of Democracy,” in *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays*, trans. Max Pensky (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001); David Held, *Cosmopolitanism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010); Thomas W. Pogge, “Cosmopolitanism and Sovereignty,” in *Restructuring in Europe*, ed. Chris Brown (New York: Routledge, 2005).

³ Seyla Benhabib, “The Philosophical Foundations of Cosmopolitan Norms,” in *Another Cosmopolitanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 17.

⁴ Benjamin R. Barber, “Constitutional Faith,” in *For Love of Country?* (Boston: Beacon, 2002), p. 33.

⁵ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), esp. Ch.8.

⁶ James D. Ingram, *Radical Cosmopolitanism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), p. 65; Immanuel Wallerstein, “Neither Patriotism nor Cosmopolitanism,” in *For Love of Country?* p. 124

Nearly forty years before the publication of “Perpetual Peace,” Jean-Jacques Rousseau claimed that cosmopolitans loved everyone “in order to have the right to love no one”⁷—that by advancing concepts such as “universal humanity” and world citizenship, cosmopolitans were attempting to elevate themselves above the political community they ostensibly shared with their fellows. Thus the claim that cosmopolitanism is too abstract to substitute for national, cultural, and familial identities is in fact a best-case scenario: at its worst, cosmopolitans threaten the political life of the community by refusing the common bonds of which this community is constituted. Perhaps the most extreme dramatization of this latter position is found in Don DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis*, where its central character, Eric Packer, a self-described “citizen of the world with a New York set of balls,”⁸ moves through the city in his armoured limousine like a kind of all-devouring amoeba, destroying lives near and far in the process. Is there no other hope for cosmopolitanism than to be caught between, on one hand, an abstract commitment to universal principles that allows the cosmopolitan to distance himself from the petty struggles of his compatriots, and on the other, the desire to swallow the world whole, commensurate with the global capitalist vanguard?⁹ Is there not a deep affinity between the cosmopolitan humanist and the cosmopolitan capitalist, both of whom seek to domesticate the local and the particular within an over-arching system of equivalences, wherein the particular is simply a moment of the universal?

In the following paper, I want to draw on the thought of Theodor Adorno in order to offer an alternative to these forms of cosmopolitanism. Specifically, there are three aspects of Adorno’s philosophy that together compel a re-evaluation of important features of contemporary cosmopolitan theory:

- (I) Adorno’s conception of ‘constellations’ allows him to gesture toward a different relationship between universal and particular than the one assumed by theorists of cosmopolitanism, wherein the particular is subsumed within or beneath overarching universal concepts.
- (II) Adorno’s claim to solidarity with ‘tormentable bodies,’ which provides the particular and visceral connection between the abstraction of the idea of constellations and moral practice.
- (III) Adorno’s often neglected conception of a ‘global subject,’ which provides a way of bringing together moral action driven by solidarity and giving it a political direction that is global in scope.

Due to time restrictions, in the following paper I will examine only the first of these points: Adorno’s use of the term ‘constellations’ and its relevance to our understanding of certain

⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Geneva MS (extract),” in *Of the Social Contract and Other Political Writings*, ed. Christopher Bertram, trans. Quintin Hoare (New York: Penguin, 2012), p. 147. Cf. Rousseau, *Œuvres Complètes*, Vol. III, eds. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 287.

⁸ Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* (New York: Scribner, 2003), p. 26.

⁹ On the relation between global capitalism and cosmopolitanism, see Timothy Brennan, “Cosmopolitanism and Internationalism,” in *Debating Cosmopolitics*, pp. 40-50; Craig Calhoun, “The Class Consciousness of Frequent Travellers: Towards a Critique of Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism,” in *Debating Cosmopolitics*, pp. 86-116; Costas Douzinas, *Human Rights and Empire: The Political Philosophy of Cosmopolitanism* (New York: Routledge-Cavendish, 2007), pp. 135ff.

important strands in contemporary theories of cosmopolitanism, especially as they relate to the possibility of cosmopolitan solidarity.

As might be expected of one of “the keywords of our times,” cosmopolitanism is a contested term, subject to different definitions commensurate with the approaches used to examine it. In the following paper I will be less concerned with the institutional arrangements that have been called cosmopolitan than I will be with the theories that concern *how people might be* cosmopolitans. What kinds of people are needed to support cosmopolitan politics? How does an individual become cosmopolitan? What kinds of things are valued by cosmopolitans? These are the questions that orient my present discussion, and the possibility of cosmopolitanism as a solidarity with diverse others.

Perhaps the most well-known answers to this set of questions comes from the work of Martha Nussbaum. Drawing upon the ancient origins of cosmopolitanism with the Cynics and its development in the philosophy of the Stoics, Nussbaum lauds an allegiance to the moral community of all human beings above the particular identities found in nation or state, tribe, culture, race, or religion.¹⁰ Humans, *as humans*, have a universal moral obligation to other humans that transcends their particular affiliations. Much like how in the institutional sphere cosmopolitans consider “cosmopolitan right” to trump the positive laws of a given state,¹¹ Nussbaum presents cosmopolitan values—values conducive to the flourishing of universal human capabilities—as trumps for values rooted in one’s particular way of life, habits, or preferences. The cosmopolitan is thus one who values reason and the love of humanity before the accoutrements that compose one’s particular and contingent identity, and one becomes cosmopolitan by learning to value in this way: by learning to recognize universal humanity in its various particular “guises,” and to place the universal first.¹²

While Nussbaum considers the subordination of the particular to the universal to be a necessary and vital, indeed—*the vital*—element in producing a cosmopolitan subject, others argue that cosmopolitanism need not depend on such a stark opposition between particular and universal. Unlike Nussbaum’s neo-Stoicism, Kwame Anthony Appiah’s “rooted cosmopolitanism” or “cosmopolitan patriotism” aims to elevate the role particulars play in any meaningful universal claim. For Appiah, particulars are not simply the necessary vessels for the universal that the cosmopolitan must be careful not to fetishize, but an integral part of cosmopolitanism: cosmopolitanism must necessarily include pluralism as the celebration of diverse local ways of being.¹³ Rather than overlook the color of particulars,¹⁴ Appiah sees particulars as the necessary color of any universal—he even offers the slogan: cosmopolitanism is “universality plus difference.”¹⁵

¹⁰ Interestingly, Nussbaum does not include gender among the particularities listed here, although she does chastise “American feminism” elsewhere for its alleged lack of “a more generous and general concern for human functioning.” See Martha C. Nussbaum, “Aristotle, Feminism, and Needs for Functioning,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Aristotle*, ed. Cynthia A. Freeland (University Park: State University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), pp. 256-7.

¹¹ Benhabib, “The Philosophical Foundations of Cosmopolitanism Norms,” pp. 26-9.

¹² Nussbaum, “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism,” in *For Love of Country?* pp. 7; 9; 15.

¹³ Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*, p. 144; “Cosmopolitan Patriotism,” in *For Love of Country?* p. 25.

¹⁴ According to Nussbaum, cosmopolitanism “may seem at times less colorful than other sources of belonging.” See “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism,” p.15.

¹⁵ Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*, p.151.

This ‘*plus*’ is telling, however. Though Appiah’s brand of cosmopolitanism places much greater emphasis on the importance of particulars and the necessary diversity of values than Nussbaum, the diversity of local values remain secondary to universal values, which are the properly cosmopolitan values. While the cosmopolitan cannot be expected to embrace all values, in order for a value to receive the cosmopolitan endorsement as one of those values legitimately animating diverse lives, it must be one “worth living by.” Appiah suggests a value is *not* worth living by if it fails to recognize that “every human being has obligations to every other,” a fact which allows “us” to “sharply [limit] the scope of our tolerance.”¹⁶ Though Appiah does not specify exactly how the content of actual values might be parsed out in order to establish which are local and which are universal, and again which universals are benign and which are malign,¹⁷ an image of cosmopolitanism defined by two sets of values emerges here. Appiah’s cosmopolitanism is constituted by a set of core values to which all cosmopolitans subscribe, and a set of local values to which all cosmopolitans need not subscribe, though these local values are only considered legitimate insofar as they do not violate core values. In this way, like Nussbaum, we are left with the subordination of particulars to universals, the color to the colorless, even if Appiah spends more time describing the colors in the cosmopolitan tapestry.

At this point it is worth asking: to what extent does this so-called subordination of particulars to universals matter to politics? How is this more than an abstract problem for theorists? Recall Rousseau’s criticism of cosmopolitans: “justifying their love for the fatherland by their love for mankind, [they] boast of loving everyone in order to have the right to love no one.”¹⁸ Love for universal humanity is empty, because one can only ever love *particular* human beings. If values can be derived from human universality that trump the human particularities that constitute a given political community, then those with access to the knowledge of human universality can elevate themselves above their political communities: they will invest more weight in their own words than those of their so-called equals, not due to having persuaded these so-called equals of the value of their words, but through appeals that bypass the opinions of these equals entirely. In this light, it is not surprising that both Nussbaum and Appiah have been criticized for “claiming epistemic privilege” and reinforcing “deep asymmetries in the domestic and international cultural, economic, and political order,”¹⁹ for their love of humanity conceals a perspective on politics that amounts to the benevolent rule of philosophers.²⁰ In the contemporary world the rule of the philosophers has become the rule of technocrats, and as globalization continues its advance, this rule and the political impotence it entails for the large majority of people have contributed to the anger, resentment, and xenophobia that have fueled the renewal of far-right nationalism, and the polarization of the political spectrum.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.144.

¹⁷ For instance, couldn’t the value a militant religious sect places on converting non-believers recognize their moral obligation to other humans? Appiah’s caveats of plurality and fallibility (*Cosmopolitanism*, p.144) don’t seem to be enough to avoid this problem, for the religious sect might invite diverse ways of practicing its values, accept deviance on non-core values, and continually revise its decisions according to debates among its experts. None of this would preclude this religious sect from torturing and murdering those who refuse conversion or violate core values.

¹⁸ Rousseau, “Geneva MS (extract),” p.147. Cf. Rousseau, *Œuvres Complètes*, Vol. III, p. 287.

¹⁹ Ingram, *Radical Cosmopolitics*, pp. 83; 65.

²⁰ Or what has elsewhere been polemically named “humanocracy.” See John R. Wallach, “Contemporary Aristotelianism,” *Political Theory* 20.4 (1992): p.629.

Adorno's conception of constellations is of value here insofar as it allows us to reconceive the relation between universal and particular in a way that doesn't demand the sacrifice of the particular to the universal, but without jettisoning the universal entirely and succumbing to relativism. The term 'constellation' comes to Adorno from Walter Benjamin, who had employed it allegorically in referring to the manner in which he saw ideas as complexes of diverse and contradictory extremes.²¹ It should be noted that this definition is inadequate by design: as Adorno notes in an early work, constellations are employed as an interpretive practice "in order to avoid definitions."²² Rather than articulate a definitive set of rules describing the technical operation of thinking in constellations, Adorno and Benjamin 'explain' constellations primarily through their use, by bringing diverse and often contradictory concepts together in order to express their historical content through their tension. That said, rather than offer hundreds of collocations with the hope that these will eventually spark a flash of understanding in the listener, in the interest of time I will cheat a bit here, and offer as straightforward an explanation of the concept of constellations as I can without making too great an effort to avoid a definition.

Adorno calls identity the subjectively established correlation between a concept and an object of experience. Insofar as experience is dynamic and mediated by our divided societies—that is, insofar as we are living, breathing, corporal entities compelled to suffer ourselves from particular positions within societies where not all positions are the same—the identity between subject and object as mediated by the concept must fail. The division of the social whole prevents any one subject from a complete view of the whole, and consequently our use of concepts to establish identity produces remainders—blind spots and fragments that cannot be integrated and that threaten this identity with collapse. Thinking in constellations accepts these cognitive limits in a way that displaces them—in a sense 'tricking' the subject into seeing around his own subjectively produced blinders. This 'trick' is accomplished by bringing diverse and contradictory concepts into a single context wherein each reveals in the others the fragments of experience they would suppress. That is to say, different concepts reveal and conceal different dimensions of experience. In bringing together contradictory concepts, a constellation represents both the dimensions of the concepts they reveal, and those they would conceal. In the tension of their contradictions, the 'solidity' of concepts in constellation melt into the fluidity of their practical use and thus their historically constituted character: the process stored in their objects becomes visible, and so one might "attain, in thinking, what was necessarily excised from thinking"²³—its historical character.

Yet in revealing the historically constituted character of concepts, Adorno does not simply reduce their claims of universality to particularity. In their constellated relation, concepts reveal beyond their particularity in order to give greater expression to the dynamism of the social

²¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (New York: Verso, 2009), pp. 34-5. Cf. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 1* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), pp. 214-5. On some differences between Benjamin's and Adorno's use of the term 'constellation,' see Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 176. On the relation between Benjamin and Adorno's thought more generally, see Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics* (New York: Free Press, 1977).

²² Theodor W. Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 92. Cf. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 2* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1962), p. 132.

²³ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 2007), p. 162. Cf. pp. 163; 165. Cf. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 6* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), pp. 164-8.

whole as it exists at a given historical point. Despite being a subjectively constituted context, a constellation presents an image of the socio-historical whole that, while not total or impervious to future revision, is nevertheless irreducible to the particularity of the subject and the conceptual framework the subject employs to identify experience. That is, Adorno's attempt to "save" the particularities of experience from being subsumed beneath universal concepts generates a new way of understanding the universal. Constellations reveal the universality of the relation between particulars, a negative and hence dynamic universal, rather than the positive universal that would identify particularities as local instantiations of the universal, and so eradicate their difference.²⁴ In this way Adorno's concept of constellations turns the universal on its head: the universal does not in this conception sit above particulars as their aspiration, nor does it endeavor to consume them. Rather, the universal is the relation between particulars that changes as its constituent particulars change.

To attempt to re-think cosmopolitanism along the lines of this transformed relation between particular and universal involves two steps. The first concerns both a personal and collective struggle against the forms of identity which serve to limit the intelligibility of diverse experiences and present particular social positions as absolute. The second concerns solidarity-building between the struggles against these forms of identity both within a given society, and around the globe. This form of solidarity is not cosmopolitan in the sense of being allied to universal principles that transcend one's locality, but is rather a solidarity with 'tormentable bodies,' a solidarity with the suffering of others and their attempts to transform the conditions that produce and aggravate this suffering.²⁵ To practice cosmopolitan solidarity in this manner is not to aim to establish universal values to which a cosmopolitan must adhere and which then provide the measure of diverse struggles. Rather, this solidarity attempts to constellate diverse struggles around the globe in a manner that supports them in their particularity, and sees their universality only in the relations formed between these particular struggles—a universality that will necessarily change along with the dynamics of these struggles. Cosmopolitanism in this conception is contact with diverse others that spurs creative appropriations of the local against the domination of universals as they are reproduced in local forms. I have argued that Adorno's re-thinking of the relation between particular and universal in the concept of constellations provides a way to begin thinking about this process, and a re-appropriation of the cosmopolitan tradition that sought to describe moral and political possibilities in a world where the suffering of one is felt by all.

²⁴ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 48; 346. Cf. *GSB6*, pp. 57; 339.

²⁵ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 286; *GSB6*, p. 281. Though Adorno has been criticized for drawing on an undifferentiated—even "undialectical"—conception of suffering, the multiple uses Adorno makes of suffering in his work implies a more complex conception, which would include not only suffering in the sense of the experience of pain, but also suffering in the sense of "undergoing," or the passive element in experience. It seems to me clear that Adorno wants to end suffering as the forms of pain attached to domination, not passive experience as such, though a more thorough examination of this point is beyond the scope of this paper. See Raymond Geuss, "Suffering and Knowledge in Adorno," in *Outside Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 128-130. Cf. Fabian Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 144-149.