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The Importance of Elsewhere

In Defense of Cosmopolitanism

Kwame Anthony Appiah

In October 2016, British Prime Minister Theresa May made her first speech to a Conservative conference as party leader. Evidently seeking to capture the populist spirit of the Brexit vote that brought down her predecessor, she spoke of “a sense—deep, profound, and, let’s face it, often justified—that many people have today that the world works well for a privileged few, but not for them.” What was needed to challenge this, May argued, was a “spirit of citizenship” lacking among the business elites that made up one strand of her party’s base. Citizenship, she said, “means a commitment to the men and women who live around you, who work for you, who buy the goods and services you sell.” She continued:

Today, too many people in positions of power behave as though they have more in common with international elites than with the people down the road, the people they employ, the people they pass on the street. But if you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere. You don’t understand what citizenship means.

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Although May never used the term, her target was clear: the so-called cosmopolitan elite.

Days after this speech, I was giving a lecture on nationalism for the BBC. The prime minister had been talking in Birmingham, the only one of the five largest British cities that had voted—by the barest of margins, 50.4 percent to 49.6 percent—for Brexit. I was speaking in the largest Scottish city, Glasgow, where two-thirds of the population had voted to stay in the EU, just as every other Scottish district did. Naturally, somebody asked me what I thought about May’s “citizen of nowhere” comment.

It wasn’t the first time I’d heard such a charge, and it won’t be the last. In the character of Mrs. Jellyby, the “telescopic philanthropist” of *Bleak House*, Charles Dickens memorably invoked someone who neglects her own children as she makes improving plans for the inhabitants of a far-off land and whose eyes “had a curious habit of seeming to look a long way off,” as if “they could see nothing nearer than Africa!” The attitude that May evoked has a similar affliction: it’s that of the frequent flyer who can scarcely glimpse his earth-bound compatriots through the clouds.

But this is nearly the opposite of cosmopolitanism. The cosmopolitan task, in fact, is to be able to focus on both far and near. Cosmopolitanism is an expansive act of the moral imagination. It sees human beings as shaping their lives within nesting memberships: a family, a neighborhood, a plurality of overlapping identity groups, spiraling out to encompass all humanity. It asks us to be many things, because we are many things. And if its critics have seldom been more clamorous, the creed has never been so necessary.



Containing multitudes: pedestrians on the Brooklyn Bridge, December 2018

NOWHERE MEN

Cosmopolitanism was born in the fourth century BC as an act of defiance, when Diogenes the Cynic—who came from Sinope, a Greek-speaking city on the Black Sea—first claimed he was a *kosmopolitês*. The word, which seems to be a neologism of his own, translates more or less as “citizen of the world.” Diogenes was fond of challenging the common sense of his day, and this word was meant to have a paradox built into it: a *politês* was a free adult male citizen of a polis, one of the self-governing Greek towns in southeastern Europe and Asia Minor, and the *kosmos* was, well, the whole of the universe. It would have been obvious to any of Diogenes’ contemporaries that you couldn’t belong to the universe in the same way as you belonged to a town such as Athens, which had some 30,000 free male adult citizens in his day (and a total population of perhaps 100,000). It was a contradiction in terms as obvious as the one in “global village,” a phrase coined by the media theorist Marshall McLuhan a little more than half a century ago.

Village equals small; globe equals enormous. Cosmopolitanism takes something small and familiar and projects it onto a whole world of strangers.

Nonetheless, this paradoxical formulation has come to enjoy extraordinary appeal around the planet. Conservative populism may be on the rise in Europe, but in a 2016 study conducted by the BBC, nearly three-quarters of the Chinese and Nigerians polled—along with more than half of the Brazilians, Canadians, and Ghanaians polled—said that they saw themselves “more as a global citizen” than a citizen of their own country. Even two in five Americans felt the same way.

Yet there is something misleading about this conception of identity. The BBC poll presupposes that one must weigh the relative importance of global and local allegiances against each other, as if they were bound to be in competition. That seems to be the wrong way to think about things. After all, I am, like millions of people, a voting member of at least three political entities: New York City, New York State, and

the United States. If asked which I was more committed to, I'd have a hard time knowing how to answer. I'd feel the same puzzlement if my metaphorical citizenship of the world were added to the list. Because citizenship is a kind of identity, its pull, like that of all identities, varies with the context and the issue. During mayoral elections, it matters most that I'm a New Yorker; in senatorial elections, the city, the state, and the country all matter to me. In presidential elections, I also find myself thinking as both a citizen of the United States and a citizen of the world. So many of the gravest problems that face us—from climate change to pandemics—simply don't respect political borders.

In her speech to her fellow Conservatives, May was asking not just for a sense of citizenship but also for patriotism, an attachment that is emotional, not merely procedural. Yet there's no reason a patriot cannot feel strongly in some moments about the fate of the earth, just as a patriot can feel strongly about the prospects of a city. Managing multiple citizenships is something everyone has to do: if people can harbor allegiances to a city and a country, whose interests can diverge, why should it be baffling to speak of an allegiance to the wider world? My father, Joe Appiah, was an independence leader of Ghana and titled his autobiography *The Autobiography of an African Patriot*; he saw no inconsistency in telling his children, in the letter he left for us when he died, that we should remember always that we were citizens of the world.

PATRIOTIC COSMOPOLITANS

That thought is one my father probably got from Marcus Aurelius, the second-

century Roman emperor whose *Meditations* lived alongside the Bible on his bedside table. Marcus wrote that for him, as a human being, his city and fatherland was the universe. It's easy to dismiss this as so much imperial grandeur, and yet the point of the metaphor for Stoics such as Marcus was that people were obliged to take care of the whole community, to act responsibly with regard to the well-being of all their fellow world citizens. That has been the central thought of the cosmopolitan tradition for more than two millennia.

But there is something else important in that tradition, which developed more clearly in European cosmopolitanism in the eighteenth century: a recognition and celebration of the fact that our fellow world citizens, in their different places, with their different languages, cultures, and traditions, merit not just our moral concern but also our interest and curiosity. Interactions with foreigners, precisely because they are different, can open us up to new possibilities, as we can open up new possibilities to them. In understanding the metaphor of global citizenship, both the concern for strangers and the curiosity about them matter.

The German intellectual historian Friedrich Meinecke explored the modern philosophical origins of this idea in his 1907 book, *Cosmopolitanism and the National State*. Through a careful reading of German intellectuals from the Enlightenment until the late nineteenth century, he showed how the rise of German nationalism was intimately intertwined with a form of cosmopolitanism. In the late eighteenth century, Johann Gottfried Herder and other cosmopolitan thinkers began imagining

a German nation that brought together the German-speaking peoples of dozens of independent states into a union founded on a shared culture and language, a shared national spirit.

It took a century for modern Germany to achieve that vision (although without the German-speaking parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire). In 1871, a Prussian monarch presided over the unification of more than two dozen federated kingdoms, duchies, principalities, and independent cities. But as Meinecke showed, the thinkers behind this accomplishment were deeply respectful of the national spirits and peoples of other nations, as well. In true cosmopolitan spirit, Herder revered the literature and arts of foreigners. His ideas about national culture inspired a generation of folklorists, including the Brothers Grimm, but he also wrote essays on Shakespeare and Homer. One could be both cosmopolitan and patriotic; indeed, for the great liberal nationalists of the nineteenth century, patriotism was ultimately a vehicle for cosmopolitanism. It's why Giuseppe Mazzini, a champion of Italian unification, urged his fellow citizens to "embrace the whole human family in your affections."

The stock modern slander against the cosmopolitans—which played a central role in anti-Semitic Soviet propaganda under Stalin in the period after World War II—is that they are "rootless." This accusation reflects not just moral blindness but also intellectual confusion. What's distinctive about modern cosmopolitanism is its celebration of the contribution of every nation to the chorus of humanity. It is about sharing. And you cannot share if you have nothing to bring to the table.

Cosmopolitans worthy of the label have rhizomes, spreading horizontally, as well as taproots, delving deep; they are anything but rootless.

Another corollary of cosmopolitanism is worth stressing: in respecting the rights of others to be different from themselves, cosmopolitans extend that right to the uncosmopolitan. The thought that every human being matters—the universalism at the heart of cosmopolitanism—is not optional. Cosmopolitanism is thus also committed to the idea that individuals and societies have the right to settle for themselves many questions about what is worthwhile and many features of their social arrangements. In particular, many people value a sense of place and wish to be surrounded by others who speak a familiar language and who follow customs they think of as their own. Those people—the British journalist David Goodhart has dubbed them "Somewheres," in contrast to "Anywheres"—are entitled to shape a social world that allows them these things, that grants them the proverbial comforts of home. And if they want to sustain those comforts by keeping away people unlike themselves or cultural imports from elsewhere, then (assuming certain moral basics of nondiscrimination are observed) that is their right.

The problem, of course, is that these uncosmopolitan localists live in societies with others who think differently. They must cohabit with the cosmopolitans, just as the cosmopolitans must cohabit with them. Furthermore, societies have moral and legal duties to admit at least some foreigners—namely, those escaping persecution and death. Those obligations are shared by the community of nations,

so the burden must be distributed fairly. But each society must contribute to meeting the need.

The fact that the localists share societies with cosmopolitans in countries that have duties to asylum seekers constrains the ways in which the localist camp can achieve the comforts of home. But the existence of the localists constrains what the cosmopolitans can do, as well. Democracy is about respecting the legitimate desires of fellow citizens and seeking to accommodate them when you reasonably can.

PLAYING FAVORITES

If nationalism and cosmopolitanism are, far from being incompatible, actually intertwined, how has cosmopolitanism become such a handy bugbear for those who, like the political strategist Steve Bannon, seek to ally themselves with the spirit of nationalism? One reason is that some people have made excessive claims on behalf of cosmopolitanism. They have often been seduced by this tempting line of thought: if everybody matters, then they must matter equally, and if that is true, then each of us has the same moral obligations to everyone. Partiality—favoring those to whom one is connected by blood or culture or territory—can look morally arbitrary. The real enemy of those who worry about “citizens of nowhere” is not a reasonable cosmopolitanism but the different idea, occasionally espoused by people calling themselves “citizens of the world,” that it is wrong to be partial to your own place or people.

What the impartial version of cosmopolitanism fails to understand is that the fact of everybody’s mattering equally from the perspective of

universal morality does not mean that each of us has the same obligations to everyone. I have a particular fondness for my nephews and nieces, one that does not extend to your nephews and nieces. Indeed, I believe it would be morally wrong not to favor my relatives when it comes to distributing my limited attention and treasure. Does it follow that I must hate your nephews and nieces or try to shape the world to their disadvantage? Surely not. I can recognize the legitimate moral interests of your family, while still paying special attention to mine. It’s not that my family matters more than yours; it’s that it matters more to me. And requiring people to pay special attention to their own is, as the great cosmopolitan philosopher Martha Nussbaum once put it, “the only sensible way to do good.”

We generally have a stronger attachment to those with whom we grew up and with whom we make our lives than we do to those outside the family. But we can still favor those with whom we share projects or identities, and it is a distinct feature of human psychology that we are capable of intense feelings around identities that are shared with millions or billions of strangers. Indeed, this characteristic is evident in the forms of nationalism that do not give rise to respect for other nations—as Herder’s did—but explode instead in hostility and xenophobia. That side of nationalism needs taming, and cosmopolitanism is one means of mastering it. But it is absurd to miss the other side of nationalism: its capacity to bring people together in projects such as creating a social welfare state or building a society of equals.

GLOBAL IDENTITY POLITICS

Beyond the charge that cosmopolitanism is inconsistent with nationalism, another objection to it holds that humanity as a whole is too abstract to generate a powerful sense of identity. But scale simply cannot be the problem. There are nearly 1.4 billion Chinese, and yet their Chinese identification is a real force in their lives and politics. The modern nation-state has always been a community too large for everyone to meet face-to-face; it has always been held together not by literal companionship but by imaginative identification. Cosmopolitans extend their imaginations only a small step further, and in doing so, they do not have to imagine away their roots. Gertrude Stein, the Pittsburgh-born, Oakland-raised writer who lived in Paris for four decades, was right: “What good are roots,” she asked, “if you can’t take them with you?”

To speak for global citizenship is not to oppose local citizenship, then. My father, a self-described citizen of the world, was deeply involved in the political life of his hometown, Kumasi, the capital of the old empire of Ashanti, to which he was proud to belong. He was active, too, in the Organization of African Unity (which became the African Union). He served his country, Ghana, at the UN, in which he also believed passionately. He loved Ashanti traditions, proverbs, and folktales, as well as Shakespeare; as a lawyer, he admired Cicero, whom he would quote at the drop of a hat, but also Thurgood Marshall and Mahatma Gandhi. He listened to the music of Bessie Smith (the African American “Empress of the Blues”), Sophie Tucker (a Ukrainian-born vaudeville star), and Umm Kulthum (an Egyptian singer), and

he sang along to the work of the English musical-theater duo Gilbert and Sullivan. None of that stopped him from joining the Ghanaian independence movement, serving in Ghana’s national parliament, or laying the foundations of pro bono legal work in the country. He recognized that what May called the “bonds and obligations that make our society work” are global as well as local. He saw that those obligations existed not only in his home country and his hometown but also in the international arena. He recognized what that very English poet Philip Larkin once called “the importance of elsewhere.”

Those who deny the importance of elsewhere have withdrawn from the world, where the greatest challenges and threats must be confronted by a community of nations, with a genuine sense of obligation that transcends borders. Today, atmospheric carbon dioxide levels are at their highest point in 800,000 years. Oceanic acidification worsens each year. And according to the UN, there were almost 260 million international migrants in 2017, many fleeing war and oppression in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.

As populist demagogues around the world exploit the churn of economic discontent, the danger is that the politics of engagement could give way to the politics of withdrawal. A successful cosmopolitanism must keep its eyes on matters near and far, promoting political systems that also work for localists. The Anywheres must extend their concern to the Somewheres. But forgetting that we are all citizens of the world—a small, warming, intensely vulnerable world—would be a reckless relaxation of vigilance. Elsewhere has never been more important. 🌍