

## REVIEW: COSMOPOLITANISM: IDEALS AND REALITIES

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David Held  
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### Introduction

Cosmopolitan theory can be traced back to the Stoics and the writings of Emmanuel Kant, but is all the more relevant for contemporary global law and politics. Over the past decade David Held<sup>1</sup> has written numerous essays on the topic of cosmopolitanism, and a selection of his work forms the basis of his book *Cosmopolitanism: Ideals and Realities* in which Held pleads for a cosmopolitan approach in international affairs. Key to his argument is the relationship between democracy, globalization and cosmopolitanism. Held sets out the different conceptions of cosmopolitanism, its core principles and justifications and the role cosmopolitanism has played in shaping our current framework of global politics, from the international human rights regime to the European Union to the Kyoto protocol. Focusing on the three most pressing global challenges of our time, the international security agenda, the financial crisis and climate change, Held argues that cosmopolitanism is the only way forward and shapes the direction policy must take to overcome these challenges (p. 521-522).

### I. Cosmopolitanism

In the first three chapters Held addresses the relationship between democracy and globalisation, the flaws in the current global governance system and the need for a cosmopolitan approach. He outlines the ideas and principles underpinning cosmopolitanism, justifications of a cosmopolitan approach and the idea of a cosmopolitan law and its subsequent institutional requirements. The chapters are appropriately structured as to help the reader understand the cosmopolitan framework, but because they were originally self-standing essays some sections of the chapters do overlap.

Central to Held's thesis of cosmopolitanism is what he calls "the paradox of our times": the discrepancy between the collective, cross-border issues that we have to deal with on the one hand and the weak and incomplete means we

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<sup>1</sup> The British political theorist David Held is Graham Wallas Professor of Political Science at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

have to address these issues on the other. Our social, political and economic activities no longer take place exclusively in the domestic sphere. Because of globalization, decisions made in one country can have a tremendous impact outside the national borders. At the same time, national measures to combat global challenges such as climate change may have little to no impact at all. The answer to the rapid growth of transnational issues therefore lies in a global governance system based on cosmopolitan ideas.

Held defines cosmopolitanism as “the ethical and political space which sets out the terms of reference for the recognition of people’s equal moral worth, their active agency and what is required for their autonomy and development” (p. 49). Throughout the book he points to numerous “cosmopolitan realities”. The three core principles of cosmopolitanism, egalitarian individualism, reciprocal recognition and impartialist reasoning, are at the basis of many of the post-Second World War legal and institutional initiatives, examples being the 1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights and the subsequent 1966 Covenants, the war crime tribunals of Nuremberg, Tokyo, Yugoslavia and Rwanda, and the range of regional and international initiatives to tackle poverty, nuclear risks and ozone depletion. Yet according to Held these initiatives have “by no means generated a new deep-rooted structure of cosmopolitan accountability and regulation” (p. 56) and have so far failed to successfully address the global financial crisis, international security threats and climate change.

Eight paramount principles of cosmopolitanism can be discerned: (1) equal worth and dignity; (2) active agency, or people’s right to self-determination; (3) personal responsibility and accountability; (4) consent, or a non-coercive political process in which all take part; (5) collective decision-making about public matters through voting procedures; (6) inclusiveness and subsidiarity, or equal opportunities for those affected by public issues to shape them; (7) avoidance of serious harm; and (8) sustainable development.

Held uses two fundamental metaprinciples as the justifying rationale of the eight cosmopolitan principles: the metaprinciple of autonomy, which stipulates that all persons should be equally free and should enjoy equal liberty to pursue their own activities, and the metaprinciple of impartialist reasoning, which is a moral frame of reference for specifying principles that can be universally shared – principles that meet the test of impartiality are defensible from a larger, human standpoint.

Although all eight principles meet the metaprinciples of autonomy and impartialist reasoning, contemporary cosmopolitans disagree whether cosmopolitanism is an overriding frame of reference or whether cosmopolitan principles are actually compatible with other layers of moral reasoning. Held’s own point of view is that although the eight cosmopolitan principles are universal, their precise meaning is dependent upon the situation at hand. This interpretation of cosmopolitanism is probably easiest to achieve, yet it begs the question whether such a ‘lighter’ version of cosmopolitanism does not

undermine its founding principles. Allowing different spheres of ethical reasoning to interpret the eight paramount principles weakens their universal character.

The eight principles that form the basis of the cosmopolitan rulebook are referred to by Held as cosmopolitan law. The question is, then, who is the rightful authority that can enforce these principles? Such an overarching legal framework clashes with the idea of territorial sovereignty; on the contrary, cosmopolitan law requires some form of cosmopolitan sovereignty, defined by Held as “a framework of political relations and regulatory activities, shaped and formed by an overarching cosmopolitan legal structure” (p. 100). This cosmopolitan sovereignty is founded upon four institutional dimensions of cosmopolitanism. First, legal cosmopolitanism is the ultimate global legal order in which persons enjoy universal equality before the law. Second, political cosmopolitanism involves the development of a global governance system that enforces cosmopolitan law universally. Third, economic cosmopolitanism refers to fair conditions for economic competition and cooperation across the globe. Last, cultural cosmopolitanism means recognizing our increasing interconnectedness, developing mutual cultural understanding, and at the same time celebrating cultural differences. Held does not discriminate between these four institutional dimensions of cosmopolitanism; it seems, however, that without cultural cosmopolitanism legal, political and economic cosmopolitanism are difficult if not impossible to bring about. Given the failed referendum on the European Constitution, the current rise of populism in Europe and the success of the Tea Party in the United States, to name a few examples, it would have been interesting to read more about cultural cosmopolitanism and how this could best be developed. Public support for the cosmopolitan agenda seems to be lagging behind, and without public support the cosmopolitan framework is quite impossible to realise.

## **II. The Paradox of Our Times**

The paradox of our times refers to our current lack of means to effectively address some of the most pressing cross-border issues of our time. In the second half of his book, Held discusses these issues more in-depth, focusing on how we have dealt with them so far and what could be a more adequate, cosmopolitan response. Chapter 4 focuses on the relationship between violence, law and justice. One of the major problems of international law is the credibility gap between its promises of protection on the one hand and the weakness of its application on the other. Held points to the establishment of the war crime tribunals for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and for Rwanda (ICTR) and the permanent International Criminal Court (ICC) as important developments towards closing this gap. He argues for a “movement for global, not American, justice and legitimacy, aimed at establishing and extending the rule of law in the place of war, and at fostering understanding between communities in the place of terror” (p. 133). Remarkably, Held points to the

need for self-examination in both the West and the Islamic World but fails to mention the role of other important players such as Russia and China.

The fifth chapter is concerned with global governance in its broadest sense: why should we be concerned with global challenges, what are the problems and dilemmas of global problem solving, what would the ideal global governance framework look like and how do we align global governance with democracy, a governing principle that has traditionally been applied in territorially delimited political communities? The chapter thus touches upon many different issues concerning global governance and it would have made sense to change the sequence of chapters 4 and 5, having a more general chapter about collective action problems first and then continuing with the specific fields of international security, the financial crisis and climate change.

In chapter 6 Held offers an analysis of the causes and consequences of the global financial crisis. He argues that the current financial crisis is not an issue-specific crisis but a symptom of broader deficiencies in the global governance framework. Comparing the policy domains of finance, security and the environment, Held points to two structural institutional problems across these domains: a capacity problem – the existing institutions are not fit for purpose – and a responsibility problem – responsibility is dispersed.

The last chapter focuses on the role of democracies and global governance institutions in responding to the global challenge of climate change. In order to shift from policy commitments to binding action, democracies have to overcome problems of short-term thinking, spill-over effects and weak multilateralism. On the global level, policy-making should be based on inclusiveness, political equality and participation. Held also introduces a number of policy proposals to combat climate change, ranging from a cap and trade system to a carbon tax scheme and other financial incentives that can help to reduce emissions.

More so than in the first half of the book, it is clear that the last four chapters were originally self-standing essays. They serve as illustrations of the deficits in the current approaches towards a number of global challenges, though the linkage with cosmopolitan theory as set out in chapters 1-3 could have been more explicit.

## **Conclusion**

David Held provides us with a strong, all-encompassing framework of cosmopolitanism: its underlying principles and justifications, existing cosmopolitan initiatives as well as current flaws in those initiatives and necessary points of improvement. He is realistic when it comes to building a cosmopolitan world order: the existing framework should be built upon, but such a major change – similar to the development of the modern territorial state – cannot be expected to be carried out in a generation. It is not clear who

Held thinks will or should take the lead in this transformation process. A combination of visionary leadership and bottom-up support seems essential for the cosmopolitan agenda to succeed. Furthermore, the examples used by Held throughout his book illustrate that development and reform of global governance institutions have always been the result of crisis, war or economic collapse. Without the global financial crisis, countries would probably not have agreed on reforms of the IMF, World Bank and the Financial Stability Board; the establishment of the international criminal courts of Yugoslavia and Rwanda has been important in many respects, but cannot mask the fact that we somehow failed to stop the mass atrocities taking place in these regions; the failure of the League of Nations signalled that in fact, something even graver than World War I had to take place before countries were willing to work together for a stable international peace, and still many would argue that the United Nations has known more failures than successes. This begs the question of how severe the threats of global insecurity, financial instability and climate change must be before we will actually embrace cosmopolitanism. It would be very interesting to hear Held's opinion on this.