

Cosmopolitan Education and Responsible World-Building

Ann Chinnery
Simon Fraser University

Let me begin by thanking Leonard Waks for an interesting and provocative essay. Cosmopolitanism is indeed in the midst of a revival of sorts, and I welcome both his invitation to consider some of the varied approaches that come under that heading and his claim that supporters of cosmopolitanism and their critics are missing opportunities to look beyond their differences in order to work together on theoretical and practical projects. In keeping with Waks' emphasis, I too will limit my remarks to the moral and political implications of cosmopolitanism rather than the cultural and aesthetic aspects, although I suspect that in real life they are not so easily disentangled.

I will first briefly address the critique of cosmopolitan universalism as incompatible with feminism, and in the second part of my response I want to begin to take up Tom Popkewitz's challenge to "unthink what seems natural... [in order to] open other possibilities of schooling, teaching, and teacher education."¹ To that end I will turn to the work of Emmanuel Levinas to ask whether we could conceive of cosmopolitan education outside of the prevailing framework, rooting it in radical responsibility to and for the Other, rather than in the recognition and promotion of basic human similarity and universal rights.

First, then, on cosmopolitanism and feminism: While it might be true that cosmopolitan universalism is incompatible with *certain strands* of feminist thought, I would be cautious about making more general claims about their incompatibility. For example, it is precisely the commonality of human experience and the need to cultivate women's too often neglected capacity for rational thought that formed the basis of Mary Wollstonecraft's argument in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.² And let us not forget Virginia Woolf's famous quote from *Three Guineas*:

If you insist upon fighting to protect me, or "our" country, let it be understood, soberly and rationally between us, that you are fighting to gratify a sex instinct which I cannot share; to procure benefits which I have not shared and probably will not share; but not to gratify my instincts, or to protect either myself or my country. "For," the outsider will say, "in fact, as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world."³

While some have read this quote as a refusal of the category of citizen altogether, Jessica Berman and others see it as a call to a feminist cosmopolitanism.⁴

Thirdly, Martha Nussbaum has said of her own work that universalism and particularism go hand in hand insofar as individual differences are a salient feature in determining what constitutes the best human life for a particular individual within a wider conception of human flourishing or human dignity. Her books *Sex and Social Justice*⁵ and *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*⁶ in particular, she says, present "a theory of human justice, and of feminism as a humanism."⁷ Therefore, for some feminists at least, cosmopolitanism is entirely

compatible with particularism and a feminist ethic of care, insofar as the goal is to draw the concentric circles of identification — which start with the self and move outward to enclose immediate family, extended family, neighbors or local group, fellow city-dwellers, fellow countrymen, and finally humanity as a whole — “somehow toward the center.”⁸ I will return to this idea below, but my point here is simply to say that Waks is quite right to note the incompatibility between cosmopolitan universalism and certain strands of feminist thought, but we ought to be careful in suggesting that it is necessarily incompatible with a more general feminist emphasis on particularism.

Let us move now to the end of Waks’s essay, where he suggests that supporters of cosmopolitanism and their critics could benefit from working together toward a synthesis, in a manner similar to earlier efforts that were made to reconcile the justice-care debate. I agree in principle that strategic alliances often work well when targeted to particular political or practical ends. However, as I see it, the opposition between traditional cosmopolitanists and especially their postmodernist critics runs deep — specifically, the opposition lies in their respective conceptions of subjectivity and moral and political agency. In other words, it may not be the dualism between universality and particularity per se that is the problem. Even Levinas, who insists on the irreducible difference between self and other, refers to something called the Human: “It might astonish some,” he writes, “that — faced with so many unleashed forces, so many violent and voracious acts that fill our history, our societies and our souls — I should turn to the *I-Thou* or the responsibility-of-one-person-for-the-other to find the categories of the Human” (and note that “Human” is spelled with an uppercase “H”).⁹

But what is of central importance for our purposes here is that the only universalism that really counts for Levinas is a kind of “negative universalism” — the universal human condition of existential incompleteness, indebtedness, and responsibility to and for the Other, rather than a “positive universalism” consisting of a universally shared set of qualities or capacities. Levinas’s inversion of the modernist conception of subjectivity marks a shift from an understanding of subjectivity as “no other-than-self without a self” to “no self without another who summons it to responsibility,”¹⁰ and thus forms a very different basis for moral and political agency, and for the practical project of world-building.

Remember that, for Nussbaum, cosmopolitanism rests on the capacity to “recognize humanity wherever it occurs, and give *its fundamental ingredients, reason and moral capacity*, our first allegiance and respect.”¹¹ Admittedly, traditional cosmopolitanism aims to deepen our sense of responsibility for others, but, on that view, our ability to perceive the other’s needs as our own moral concern rests on an ability to see the other as basically like oneself and to draw our neighbors, fellow citizens, and others who occupy positions further from the self (in the concentric circles model) in toward the center — toward the self. My concern is that an education based on cosmopolitanism as Nussbaum and others conceive it will not move us sufficiently away from the modernist pursuit of rational self-interest to

really make a difference in how we think about our moral and political responsibilities toward others — a necessary step, in my view, to making the world anew.

Therefore, given the significance of the conceptual gaps between cosmopolitanists and their postmodernist critics, I am not convinced that it will be possible to reconcile their bedrock assumptions in a way that would make strategic alliances for practical ends possible. Rather, I want to suggest that we begin to take up Popkewitz's challenge to "unthink what seems natural"¹² by asking ourselves whether it is possible to conceive of cosmopolitanism without appeal to a conception of subjectivity already filled with human qualities and capacities. If we can do that, I think that another kind of cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitan education might come into view — a cosmopolitanism wherein the only freedom that matters is the freedom of the other, and wherein the only rights that matter are the rights of the other. As Adriaan Peperzak puts it:

The ethical relationship cannot be limited to a practice that is based on the conviction that all humans are equal in having basic rights, being citizens of democratic institutions, members of one human race.... The appearance of another in the world, which is also mine, reveals to me that I am a servant, responsible for the Other's life and destiny.¹³

Seen through a Levinasian lens, then, the practical project of world-building to which Waks calls us would mean re-imagining cosmopolitanism beginning with responsibility, not rights, and in living to and for the other, not the self.

1. Thomas Popkewitz, *Cosmopolitanism and the Age of School Reform: Science Education and Making Society by Making the Child* (New York: Routledge, 2008), xv.

2. Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London: Joseph Johnson, 1792).

3. Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (London: Hogarth Press, 1938), 197.

4. See, for example, Jessica Berman, *Modernist Fiction, Cosmopolitanism, and the Politics of Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

5. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

6. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

7. Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 9.

8. Martha Nussbaum, "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism," *Boston Review* 19, no. 5 (1994), <http://bostonreview.net/BR19.5/nussbaum.html>.

9. Emmanuel Levinas, "Apropos of Buber: Some Notes," in *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael B. Smith (London: Athlone, 1993), 42 (emphasis in original).

10. Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 187.

11. Nussbaum, "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism" (emphasis added).

12. Popkewitz, *Cosmopolitanism and the Age of School Reform*, xv.

13. Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak, *Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 23.