

Contemporaneity of Cosmopolitanism*

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Abstract

Based on recent archival research that foregrounds forgotten aspects of early 20th century literature and culture, this lecture will trace the roots of cosmopolitan modernity to its Indic sources.

Keywords : Cosmopolitanism; Internationalism; Pluralism; Sovereignty.

I

Enlightenment and its discontents

It has been held axiomatic for long that following the European Enlightenment with its four-fold defining characteristics of Rationality, Universality, Individuality and Progress, mankind was irrevocably moving towards a global civilization. It was indeed Truth to Power. Nothing else mattered, no hurdle could stall the onward march of history. Not the Bolshevik/Stalinist tyranny, Gulag Archipelago, Nazi-fascist holocausts, not the various forms of ethnic and tribal blood-letting of Ruanda and Burundi would prevent the appearance of what the Canadian media theorist Marshal McLuhan memorably called 'the global village': intercultural and cosmopolitan in character.

In the second decades of the 21st century, we seem to be less sure of the earlier claims. Neo- isolationisms, insularity and xenophobia seem to straddle the world today.

In many parts of the world, there is a darkening mood of gloom and fear of the 'other'... The other could be the illegal alien, the involuntary migrants in the cargo-containers, the refugee fleeing the conflict zones like Syria, Sudan, Burma or Iraq. Nearer home, the spectra of cross-border terrorism is beamed through the omnipresent 24 x 7 television to a besieged nation. Gated communities are increasingly dominating our city scape. Homes, offices, streets and side-walks are constantly under the gaze of the CCTV and surveillance cameras. Terrorism may come anytime from any quarter – land, sea or the air. The State arms itself with greater vigilance, and citizens with vigilantism.

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Economic slow-down and a looming crisis in the financial market add menacingly to panic and fear. The national icon today is the security expert, the intelligence operative, the military man and the Special Forces: denizens of the shadowy zones. They are our saviors, the guardian angels of modern Nation State. Repeat telecasts of images on prime-time television heightens ubiquitous anxiety and fear. The enemy lurks within and outside. It is invisible, ominous, predatory and diabolical. Only advanced weaponry, anchored to a robust and masculine state apparatus can save the day! The home and the world in Tagorean terms, are insistently marked by insularity and xenophobia.

What is the future of cosmopolitanism in such a milieu? What vision of the true international order may we embrace in our troubled times? The spirit of welcome and the Kantian sense of hospitality, the crossing of cultural boundaries and barriers that underlie cosmopolitanism from the time of Greek philosophers like Diogenes has given way to balkanized cities and States like Lebanon, Yemen, Cyprus and Sudan. Asked about the absence of the weapons of mass-destruction at the end of Gulf War-II the United States Defense Secretary is said to have replied in Orwellian double speak: "The absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence".

The Times of India date marked 30 October 2019 reports under the following headline:

Baghdadi buried at sea like Osama, say US officials.

Attention focused as well as an unknown dog, likely a Belgian Malinois, a breed favored by the military which chased Baghdadi into a tunnel under the complex, and cornered him before he detonated his suicide vest. Trump praised the dog on Sunday as 'beautiful' but military officials said any information about it, including name was secret. 'It's classified. We are protecting the dog's identity said Joint Chief of Staff, Chairman General Mark Milley...'

The dog whose nom-de-guerre is K-9 becomes thus an agent of retribution. At the same time, it epitomizes the ultimate insult to the canine population. 'Baghdadi', said Trump, 'died like a dog'.

II

Totalized Paranoid

The current scene brings to mind England during the Edwardian era from 1901 to 1910 to be precise. Popular spy fiction of the era may yield significant

insights. Dominant narratives of Imperial England during the key days of the British Empire were characterized by 'an assertive, confident and expansive genre'. H. Rider Haggard's *She* and *King Solomon's Mines* as well as the science fiction of H.G. Wells' *The Invisible Man*, *The Time Machine* or *The Island of Dr. Moreau* heralded the triumph of Victorian exploration and scientific adventure.

The enemy in Edwardian spy and counter spy fiction is invariably the French and the German who must be watched relentlessly by a fearful and fear-laden citizenry on the English Coast. England in the British 'invasion narratives' is singularly vulnerable. The spy fiction of the era typifies 'an increasingly insular, even paranoid genre, stressing vigilance and protection against invasion'.¹ The iconic hero of the Edwardian spy fiction is not the counterpart in Fredrick Forsyth's *The Day of the Jackal* (Hutchinson & co, U.K.1971) who gains our sympathy for his failure to assassinate the President of the French Republic, modelled after General Charles De Gaulle. The spy fiction of the earlier era instead proclaims 'Britain prospers as bleaker and its enemies as more monstrous'. In the words of critic Thomas Hitcher, the Edwardian counter spy fiction by supporting a host of villains hidden among the unspecifying population, added to this xenophobic attitude, (Hitchner 413) a dose of which Clive Bloom graphically portrayed as 'totalized paranoid: 'There is no knowing who is the enemy' ('therefore presume all are the enemy'),(Bloom 4), an attitude not dissimilar to our own times.

III

Jihad vs the Mc World

In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Empire in the late eighties of the last century, what Francis Fukuyama described as 'the end of history', and the supposed victory of global capitalism, four primary imperatives, in Benjamin Barber's words, propelled the vision of the Mc World. He spelt this out, initially in his 1992 article in *The Atlantic* and later in his 1995 book entitled *Jihad and the Mc World*. Both according to Barber, were coercive, tyrannical and antidemocratic in character. The four drives, namely, the market imperative, a resource imperative, an information technology imperative and an ecological imperative led to the shrinking of the national borders and 'achieved a considerable victory over factiousness and particularism'. 'Yesterday's wishful cry for one World' Barber concluded has yielded to cry of Mc World'.

On the other hand, technology futurist Jamie Metzl, writing in the *Harvard Journal of Law and Technology*, summer 1996, maintains that the conflict between Mc World's corporate sovereignty vs the Jihadi cult based on ethnic and religious fundamentalism, represents 'to Barber two colossal forces battling to define the individual and her relation to a changing world...'. As Metzl comments apply: 'The image the author suggests to capture the world of the late 20th Century, is neither the machete wielding Hutu or the Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) restaurant in Xian, China, but instead the Serb sniper tapping his Reeboks to Madonna on his Sony Walkman as he picks off the Muslim inhabitants of Sarajevo'. Thus, both Jihad and McWorld are not only inimical to democracy but also to cosmopolitanism. Neither the Mc World nor Jihad can be the answer to the contemporary crisis of cosmopolitanism.

IV

Trajectories

The contemporary understanding of cosmopolitanism comes primarily through Western scholarship. Etymologically the term comes from two Greek words, 'Cosmos' and 'Poleitus' meaning 'citizen of the world'. Sheldon Pollock, the Chicago Sanskritist, speaks of two kinds of cosmopolitanism, based on two hegemonic linguistic empires: Sanskrit-based empire which according to him was more benign, and the Latin based one that was more hegemonic. (Pollock 591-625) Nick Stevenson, in turn, maintains that cosmopolitanism is concerned with the 'transgression of ethical boundaries and markers, development of intercultural relationship'.³

Does cosmopolitanism efface all local particulars and group identities? In his pivotal book *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition*, Princeton Univ. Press, 1994. Canadian Philosopher Charles Taylor argues that cultural institutions should recognize group identities as part of multicultural education. Similarly, Anthony Appiah in his *Identity against Culture: Understanding of Multiculturalism*, 1994 points to a common set of institutions and common cultures in addition to pluralistic identities. Both suggest that pluralism in civic planning is of vital importance. Thus, Taylor and Appiah seem to underline the need to exploring alternate sources of cosmopolitanism, commensurate with modern civic living especially in the West.

The limitation of the Western understanding of cosmopolitanism, as defined above, could be overcome viewed from the perspective of Indic sources and understanding.

Forgotten Sources : Indic Approaches to Cosmopolitanism

It is the context that invoking some of the overlooked insights from cosmopolitan- cultural travels during the early 20th Century advances our thinking through the varied lenses of mysticism, friendship, politics and culture. Writers narrated here have attempted to recognize and overcome East-West binaries in favor of a greater communitarian life built on shared beliefs and life value. It is perhaps in this direction that we need to move forward.

By following Rabindranath Tagore's conceptions, for example, we could arrive at the following postulates which may serve as principles contrary to Western cosmopolitanisms:

- 1) Fearless reasoning for freedom. We may recall his *Gitanjali* in this regard.
- 2) To consider the world as an essential part of oneself.
- 3) Belief in the overcoming of cultural boundaries in favor of the 'universal human'.
- 4) Belief in cultural specificity and universalism, i.e. 'If I wish to understand world literature, I must understand Bangla Literature' Not to obliterate of local literature, the Indian language for the primacy of English language and literature, not to espouse the so called 'global modern' that dominates our cultural scene today.
- 5) And thus, tradition and modernity, the local and the global go hand in hand in this alternative cosmopolitanism.

I trace such a cosmopolitanism to the Indic sources, to the following key figures that straddled the literary-cultural scene of the early 20th century India. They follow the Tagorean postulates and avoid the binaries of the Western Enlightenment, underlined in the first part this article

James Cousins (1873 - 1956).

Paul Richard (1874 - 1967)

Dilip K. Roy (1897 - 1980) - artist, singer, poet, cultural ambassador.

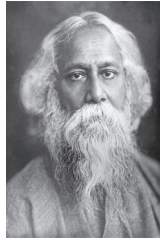
Rabindranath Tagore (1861 - 1941).

Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877 - 1947)

Taraknath Des (1884 - 1947).

Sri Aurobindo (1872 - 1950).

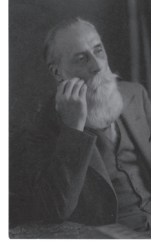
Seen together, these and allied thinkers promote a theory and practice of cosmopolitanism which transcend the binaries of Western modernity and can be applicable to our own milieu.



Rabindranath
Tagore



Tagore, Paul
Richard & Mirra
Alfassa



Paul Richard in
1930 (Photo-
Credit : Michel
Paul Richard)



James H. Cousins
(Sketch by Mirra
Alfassa)

Summing Up

We have thus come a long way from the philosopher Diogenes 'Citizen of the World' concept to Immanuel Kant's principle of cosmopolitanism law / right spelt out his 1795 essay 'Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch! These concepts need to be added to the liberal notions of universal hospitality and right of resort that mankind has attempted to enshrine in international life and behavior without uniform success.

The works of critics like Taylor and Appiah, as we have seen, have deepened our understanding of cosmopolitanism, especially the manner in which the Western States and civic communities are urged to harmonize competing drives: Between provincial and national identities, between pluralism and internationalism, between the local and the global, and finally between tradition and modernity. Similarly, with the help of recent publications like *Beyond Cosmopolitanism: Towards Planetary Transformations*, (Springer 2017) we could proceed to chart out newer pathways towards alternative cosmopolitanisms, based on a true dialogue of civilizations.

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