Dealing with Difference: Cosmopolitanism in the Nineteenth-Century World of Empires

Cosmopolitanism is—once again—part of the general political conversation. With the surge of populist movements and nationalist state policies around the globe in the 2010s, cosmopolitanism has been incorporated into an increasingly divided taxonomy of political positions. Complaining about cosmopolitan elites has turned into a rallying cry for populist leaders and their supporters. In their view, cosmopolitanism stands both for the homogenizing forces of globalization and for a class privilege of the international jet set that benefits materially and culturally from an increasingly connected world.¹ Their liberal and internationalist opponents call for a renewed cosmopolitanism that is up to the challenges of the globalized present. Cosmopolitanism, from this perspective, is a mindset that transcends national and ethnic parochialism, nativism, and bigotry by thinking in terms of a unified humankind as a critical resource against the excesses of neoliberalism and increasing global inequality.

In these debates, cosmopolitanism often appears as a polemical label that is mostly about marking political positions. At the same time, these debates refer to certain elements that are fundamental to every reflection on cosmopolitanism: the centrality of intellectual and physical border crossing; tensions between mobile and sedentary people, between city and countryside, between elites and nonelites; and an important normative dimension, especially with regard to the way in which the world and its inhabitants ought to be organized, often playing out in legal terms.

In current academic writing on the subject, two uses of the term cosmopolitanism predominate. One is a very restricted sense of the term focused on a set of classic authors of the Enlightenment, such as Immanuel Kant or Adam Smith. The other is used very broadly, covering any and every multicultural social setting, with a particularly strong following among scholars uncovering nonelite, popular, or "vernacular" forms of cosmopolitanism. The amorphous surge of the term's usage has led some scholars to speak of a "cosmopolitan turn" since the 1990s.

This dossier seeks to delineate a middle way between these two extremes by combining well laid out ideas of cosmopolitanism with its more implicit social practices, and the huge gray area between the two—what Jürgen Osterhammel, in his concluding essay in this dossier, refers to as "attitudes." We understand cosmopolitanism as ideas and practices that deliberately cope with human difference in an open-minded way.² This difference may be of national, ethnic, or religious origin. As we will see, the open-mindedness can take various forms. Cosmopolitanism in this sense is about addressing the—cultural, ethnic, racial, religious—"Other" with sympathy, curiosity, and interest, without seeking to eradicate the difference.

While scholars have often identified cosmopolitan ideas and practices with certain intellectual traditions or particular thinkers, the essays that follow demonstrate that they occurred in many different shapes and circumstances in the nineteenth-century world of European colonial empires. The essays shed light on cosmopolitan practices, cosmopolitan spaces, and individuals who may be regarded as cosmopolitan thinkers and actors. As the four research essays and conclusion in this dossier demonstrate, such practices are not bound to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment or to the globalized late twentieth century. With case studies ranging from nineteenth-century South Asia (see Markovits) and West Africa (see Rempe) to South America (see Ortega) and Europe (see Bashford, all in this dossier), these essays examine the relationship, overlaps, and tensions between ideas and practices of world citizenship in a world deeply marked by European imperial rule.

In the following pages, we spotlight how nineteenth-century cosmopolitanism can be historicized, situated, and reconceptualized. We pay particular attention to the underlying structures of empire and guiding visions of humanity. While at first glance contradictory, imperial rule and visions of humanity coalesced in reflections and struggles over rights. These reflections and struggles could occur at various levels, ranging from claims for human rights to the articulation of imperial and national citizenship rights. More generally, through the prisms of empire, humanity, and rights, thinking about cosmopolitanism can inspire critical reflection about how to deal with difference.

Historicizing Cosmopolitanism: The Nineteenth Century

Cosmopolitanism is not easy to pin down. As philosopher Pauline Kleingeld points out, Enlightenment-era cosmopolitanism carried various meanings. Her classification of six cosmopolitanisms—moral, political, juridical, economic, cultural, and romantic—reflects the broad spectrum of social spheres in which eighteenth-century German cosmopolitanism alone emerged.³ This problem only grows bigger when cosmopolitanism is not simply conceived as a noble idea but also understood as a practice that shapes everyday social relations.⁴ Discourses and practices of cosmopolitanism are never universally applicable. Instead, they have to be situated and analyzed in specific times and places.

Well before it became a buzzword in recent political debates, cosmopolitanism has been a major subject in several disciplines, ranging from anthropology and sociology to political science and philosophy. A growing body of social science literature traces different forms of contemporary world citizenship as an expression of political, economic, social, and cultural globalization since the second half of the twentieth century. Sociologists such as Ulrich Beck and philosophers such as Seyla Benhabib and Kwame Anthony Appiah have foregrounded different themes under the umbrella of cosmopolitanism, including critical reflections on methodological and political nationalism, globalization-related social cleavages and conflict, the tension between world citizenship and democracy, and religious extremism.

Even if some of these authors gesture to history, they tend to ignore longer trajectories of global connection and interaction. Yet, cosmopolitanism—both as a term and as a way of dealing with difference—has an extended and complicated history. The term entered many Western European languages in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a translation of the Greek *kosmopolitês* (citizen of the world), along with the rediscovery of Stoic philosophical texts about world citizenship.⁷ Historians and philosophers have shown particular interest in this eighteenth-century European intellectual history of

cosmopolitanism, often considered the golden age of Enlightenment. It was at this time when cosmopolitanism as a doctrine found its most influential theoretic elaboration and when Europeans travelers fanned out and described the world and its inhabitants.⁸ Even then, cosmopolitanism was met with criticism and opposition, which continue to reverberate in present-day political debates and tensions. Since the mid-nineteenth century, "cosmopolitan" came to be used also as a pejorative for "uprooted" diaspora groups (Jews being the classic reference) and uncontrollable, muddled multicultural settings.⁹

The nineteenth century—jammed between the classic age of Enlightenment (which is still dominated by scholarship on Europe) and the "cosmopolitan" moments since the end of World War I—figures less prominently in academic debates on cosmopolitanism. Historians seem to be little inclined to see cosmopolitanism as a prominent feature of an age shaped by high imperialism, nationalism, and racial thinking. ¹⁰ For intellectual historians, the period between the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the end of World War I, in particular, appears as an arid time for cosmopolitan thought. This conception persists despite the nineteenth century being widely recognized as a core period in the emergence of an increasingly interconnected world. ¹¹

This dossier sets out to change this picture and to delineate a variety of cosmopolitan mindsets and practices during a supposedly uncosmopolitan period. Our focus on the nineteenth century is not merely to connect the dots between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries. Rather, the nineteenth century proves a particularly apt case for a critical reassessment of cosmopolitanism. During this period, new global technologies such as steam ships and printing presses enabled the creation of cosmopolitan hubs in bustling port cities and the emergence of "cosmopolitan thought zones" stretching across entire oceans. ¹² Intercontinental mobility—which reached an unprecedented scale in the nineteenth century—was a central social foundation for cosmopolitan thinking and acting. This included the many forms of nonvoluntary dislocation of people (see Osterhammel). ¹³ Cosmopolitan ideas and practices appeared where one would not expect them, notably in the interplay of new political constellations such as growing empires and assertive nation-states. This dossier therefore highlights that the nineteenth century does in fact figure as a crucial period of cosmopolitanism once we look beyond the history of ideas.

Situating Cosmopolitanism

Cosmopolitan thinking always emerged out of particular places. A long intellectual tradition has identified Europe as the cradle of cosmopolitanism. In recent years, however, scholars have worked to prove Europe as only one site in a much larger, global history of cosmopolitanism. Historians of ideas have used the concept to expose non-European traditions of thought.¹⁴ Historians of oceanic zones have explored maritime spaces such as the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean as spheres of cosmopolitan thinking and practices.¹⁵ Urban historians have identified port cities and continental metropolises shaped by migration across the world as hubs of cosmopolitanism—sometimes referred to rather nostalgically in a period of increased ethnic homogeneity.¹⁶ Scholars of colonialism have acknowledged intercontinental collaboration and networks between thinkers and activists as forms of anti-imperial, anti-racist, or anti-Western cosmopolitanism and harbingers of collaboration across the global south.¹⁷ Others have pointed to intercontinental religious communities—such as the Sephardic diaspora or the Muslim world—and their cross-cultural practices.¹⁸

Situating cosmopolitanism means not only taking its occurrence in different world regions seriously but also grounding it in lived experiences and in practices such as friendship, hospitality, and conviviality. Such experiences and practices rarely conform to the abstract ideal and often remain fragmentary. Even if sometimes interconnected, they are also less institutionalized than internationalist initiatives and the corresponding conferences and associations emerging in this period. In this understanding, cosmopolitanism can be practiced by individuals, often in informal settings as well as by larger polities and states, defining statuses among diverse sets of populations.

Expanding geographically and including a host of social practices carries the danger of making cosmopolitanism too wide-ranging. Some authors have cautioned against the use of terms such as cosmopolitanism, modernity, and globalization altogether. Others have opted for extending the term cosmopolitanism and using it in the plural or adding a qualifying adjective. Scholars have coined a dizzying array of terms to refer to these forms of qualified cosmopolitanisms. In this dossier, we strike a different path, shifting from the noun to the activity, from being cosmopolitan to doing cosmopolitanism. The four case studies that follow therefore contain vivid portraits of individuals and groups navigating the nineteenth-century world of empires, which shaped their interpretation of belonging to a common humanity. They direct our attention to a diverse set of practices—such as education, language acquisition, travel, scientific investigation, law making, and religion—that often created new "moral communities" sharing assumptions about the world and its inhabitants. This take also allows us to ask how power struggles, forms of coercion, and hierarchies related to cosmopolitan thinking and acting.

Revisiting Cosmopolitanism: Empire, Humanity, and Rights

While stressing the general situatedness of cosmopolitanism, the essays in this dossier emphasize three interrelated aspects. They explore hierarchical structures of nineteenth-century empires as facilitating or impeding cosmopolitan ideas and practices. They highlight conceptions of humanity, and the underlying tensions of inclusion and exclusion. And they point to debates about rights that connect empire and conceptions of humanity by codifying citizenship laws, rights activism, or the fight for equality and respect.

This dossier puts an accent on empire as a central feature of the nineteenth-century world. All contributions to this dossier show that nineteenth-century imperial power structures provided a fertile breeding ground for cosmopolitanism, if not always—in fact, only rarely—of an ideal kind (see Osterhammel; see Bashford). Empires created zones of interaction between historical actors and thinkers of cosmopolitanism from outside and inside of Europe, and changed perceptions of humanity in the process. ²³ After all, imperial power structures were fundamentally concerned with coping with difference, albeit in an overtly hierarchical way. ²⁴ In doing so, empires gave rise to specific dynamics and posed particular challenges for cosmopolitanism. ²⁵ Even the history of European Enlightenment cosmopolitanism cannot be written without Europe's overseas expansion and opposition to it (see Osterhammel). ²⁶ In turn, many histories of cosmopolitanism outside of Europe were shaped by—or at least reflective of—imperial rule by European and non-European empires alike. Consequently, cosmopolitanism often emerged at the interstices of empire.

All the essays reveal ambiguous connections between imperialism and cosmopolitanism. This ambiguity could work as an ideology or social glue for imperial elites—and undercut their claims and hierarchies at the same time (see Markovits; see Ortega).

African intellectuals such as Edward Wilmot Blyden developed their own brand of cosmopolitan political thinking (see Rempe). Taken together, the case studies in this dossier demonstrate how certain tensions and limits inherent in the concept of cosmopolitanism become particularly visible in settings of imperial rule.

The imperial backdrop of the four articles and Osterhammel's concluding essay shows how cosmopolitan practices are shaped by, but are not identical to, the assumption of the fundamental equality of human beings.²⁷ If universalism conventionally refers to a broad and holistic idea concerning the undoing of human difference, cosmopolitanism as a practice of coping with difference can be more fragmentary and situational. How to become equal through Western education and readings was one of Blyden's major concerns (see Rempe). Debates about the differences and commonalities of human races, and the effects of racial mixing, formed the basis for the political struggles around the extension of republican equality in postindependence Latin America (see Ortega). Cosmopolitanism was part of imperial strategies of inclusion without the granting of equality (see Markovits); and, despite non-European appropriations, it often came with strong beliefs in European superiority (see Osterhammel). Thinking about human unity could be deeply embedded in colonial enterprises, and antiracism could sit alongside claims about inequality between humans (see Bashford). Somewhat counterintuitively, equality and cosmopolitan thinking were therefore not always allies, even if the question of what unifies humanity in all its plurality forms a central leitmotif of cosmopolitanism.

For that reason, the essays show in different settings that thinking in unifying terms can also include hierarchies based not only on political but also on racial, cultural, or religious claims. If empire is marked by hierarchical thinking about difference, the emergence of scientific racism and evolutionist thinking was intertwined with debates about the unity of humankind, as is the case of the "metropolitan cosmopolitans" as illustrated by T. H. Huxley and Julian Huxley (see Bashford). Thinking about the unity of humankind could apply to the social stratification of a society, such as in newly independent Colombia (see Ortega), or to the negotiation of membership in a broader imperial structure that came with it, such as in British India (see Markovits). The basis for the unity of humanity could also be religion, allowing thinkers such as Edward Blyden to transcend and reposition an Africa-centered identity (see Rempe).

In connecting the logics of empire and ideas concerning the unity of humankind, debates about cosmopolitanism reveal complex relationships with rights and their legal provision—a particular embattled arena of cosmopolitanism in practice. Placed in its social and political contexts, cosmopolitanism was intrinsically connected with struggles over the access and application of rights. Since its ancient origins, the concept of citizenship posited that being the member of a political community—a polis—conferred a certain set of rights. From the late eighteenth century on, the homogeneous nation-state became the primary framework for conferring—and claiming—citizenship rights, and has, ever since, tended to obfuscate a much older history of citizenship in more composite, imperial units. In line with recent debates about "cosmopolitan" citizenship, the dossier explores if—and under which circumstances—the connection between rights and belonging also applies to world citizenship.²⁹

The contributions show that connections between cosmopolitan respect for difference and the distribution of rights occurred on a variety of levels: worldwide, as human rights (see Bashford); imperial, as rights of imperial subjects (see Markovits); and societal, as

rights of national citizens (see Ortega). Citizenship rights were debated in the British imperial context—with the difference in status of British subjects and natives of India—and connected to broader worldwide democratic movements to gain rights and recognition in one's own territory. In colonial India, the limits of imperial citizenship and subjecthood led prominent actors to turn toward world citizenship and "imperial cosmopolitanism" as basis for their arguments for more extensive rights (see Markovits). In postcolonial Latin America, struggles for independence and republican rights could be made on the basis of the rights of a world citizen, with postimperial nation builders of the revolutionary era in Latin America pointing to the legacies of the specific colonial experience on the continent (see Ortega). While arising in a world that seems very different from the globalized twenty-first century, the case studies point to challenges that are still very much with us today: cosmopolitan legal practice addressing both general equality and the effective protection of minorities.

Who could identify as a cosmopolitan in nineteenth-century imperial and postimperial situations sometimes surprises us in hindsight, as it included both staunch imperialists and anti-imperial activists. Historicizing, situating, and reconceptualizing cosmopolitanism in the context of nineteenth-century empires show a variety of ways in which cosmopolitanism was related to power—sometimes comfortably slotted into existing power structures and sometimes cracking them open. As it was situated at the interface between hierarchical imperial structures and more egalitarian universalism, such inconsistencies and uncertainties were among cosmopolitanism's crucial features. Cosmopolitanism was—and still is—in many ways a contradictory and somewhat obscure concept. In a time of dwindling appreciation for ambiguities, however, cosmopolitanism also remains a critical reminder of sustained efforts to cope and live with differences.

NOTES

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- I. James D. Ingram, "Populism and Cosmopolitanism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul A. Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 644–60. For an earlier critique of the elite bias of cosmopolitanism (written in the wake of 9/11), see Craig J. Calhoun, "The Class Consciousness of Frequent Travelers: Toward a Critique of Actually Existing Cosmopolitanisms," in *Debating Cosmopolitics*, ed. Daniele Archibuigi (London: Verso, 2003), 92–93.
- 2. Kai Kresse, "Interrogating 'Cosmopolitanism' in an Indian Ocean Setting: Thinking Through Mombasa on the Swahili Coast," in *Cosmopolitanisms in Muslim Contexts: Perspectives from the Past*, ed. Derryl N. MacLean and Sikeena Karmali Ahmed (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 33, includes the German terms *Weltoffenheit*, *Welterfahrung*, and *Weltgewandtheit* in his definition.
- 3. Pauline Kleingeld, "Six Varieties of Cosmopolitanism in Late Eighteenth-Century Germany," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60, no. 3 (July 1999): 505–34. See also Franz L. Fillafer and Jürgen Osterhammel, "Cosmopolitanism and the German Enlightenment," in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern German History*, ed. Helmut Walser Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 119–43.
- 4. Margaret C. Jacob, *Strangers Nowhere in the World: The Rise of Cosmopolitanism in Early Modern Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); Glenda Sluga and Julia Horne, "Cosmopolitanism: Its Past and Practices," *Journal of World History* 21, no. 3 (September 2010): 369–74.
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- 7. Pauline Kleingeld and Eric Brown, "Cosmopolitanism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2019), ed. Edward N. Zalta, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/cosmopolitanism (accessed August 17, 2020); Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Cosmopolitan Tradition: A Noble but Flawed Ideal* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2019).
- 8. See, for example, Thomas Schlereth, The Cosmopolitan Ideal in Enlightenment Thought: Its Form and Function in the Ideas of Franklin, Hume, and Voltaire, 1694–1790 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977); Karen O'Brien, Narratives of Enlightenment: Cosmopolitan History from Voltaire to Gibbon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire, L'Autre et le Frère: L'Étranger et la Franc-maçonnerie en France au XVIIIe siècle (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1998); Jürgen Osterhammel, Unfabling the East: The Enlightenment's Encounter with Asia (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); Simon Burrows, "The Cosmopolitan Press, 1760–1815," in Press, Politics and the Public Sphere in Europe and North America, 1760–1820, ed. Hannah Barker and Simon Burrows (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 23–47; Andrea Albrecht, Kosmopolitismus: Weltbürgerdiskurse in Literatur, Philosophie und Publizistik um 1800 (Berlin: De Gryter, 2005); Pauline Kleingeld, Kant and Cosmopolitanism: The Philosophical Ideal of World Citizenship (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
- 9. Mirjam Thulin, "Zwischen Selbstverständnis und Stigma: Zur ambivalenten Beziehungsgeschichte von Kosmopolitismus und Judentum," in *Bessere Welten: Kosmopolitismus in den Geschichtswissenschaften*, ed. Bernhard Gißibl and Isabella Löhr (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2017), 47–70; Cathy S. Gelbin and Sander L. Gilman, *Cosmopolitanisms and the Jews* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017); Michael L. Miller and Scott Ury, eds., *Cosmopolitanism, Nationalism and the Jews of East Central Europe* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015).
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- 13. On cosmopolitanism among exiles, see, for example, Isabella, *Risorgimento in Exile*; Seema Alavi, *Muslim Cosmopolitanism in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).
- 14. See, for example, Minghui Hu and Johan Elverskog, eds., Cosmopolitanism in China, 1600–1950 (Amherst, MA: Cambria Press, 2016); Delanty, Routledge International Handbook of Cosmopolitanism Studies, part IV; Sarah Balakrishnan, "The Afropolitan Idea: New Perspectives on Cosmopolitanism in African Studies," History Compass 15, no. 2 (February 2017), https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12362.
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- 18. Francesca Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009); Alavi, *Muslim Cosmopolitanism*; Derryl N. MacLean and Sikeena Karmali Ahmed, eds., *Cosmopolitanism in Muslim Contexts: Perspectives from the Past* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).
- 19. Ulrike Freitag, "'Cosmopolitanism' and 'Conviviality'? Some Conceptual Considerations concerning the Late Ottoman Empire," European Journal of Cultural Studies 17, no. 4 (August 2014): 375–91; Leela Gandhi, Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Jane Haggis, "The Politics of Friendship and Cosmopolitan Thought Zones at the End of Empire: Indian Women's Study Tours to Europe 1934–38," History Australia 15, no. 3 (2018): 559–77.
- 20. Akira Iriye, *Cultural Internationalism and World Order* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Martin H. Geyer and Johannes Paulmann, eds., *The Mechanics of Internationalism: Culture, Society, and Politics from the 1840s to the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Glenda Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).
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