Cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitics combined: A European agora

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ABSTRACT

In the present age a new cosmopolitanism is needed. It should be envisaged beyond the traditional Eurocentric frame of reference and should combine negotiated global choices and principles with local identity issues. The latter are called "cosmopolitics·. Some epistemological points are highlighted in the article, such as the western emphasis on structure rather than process, and the conceptualisation of the state as a post-sovereign entity. Furthermore, some policy lines are touched upon.

Key words: Cosmopolitanism, cosmopolitics, post-sovereign state, Wittgenstein

RESUMEN

En la actualidad necesitamos un nuevo cosmopolitismo, el cual debería ser pensado más allá del marco eurocéntrico de referencia y combinar opciones y principios negociados globales con cuestiones de identidad local. Esto último se llama "cosmopolítica". En este texto se destacan algunos aspectos epistomológicos, como el énfasis occidental sobre la estructura más que sobre el proceso, así como la conceptualización del Estado como entidad postsoberana. Asimismo, se abordan algunas cuestiones políticas.

Palabras clave: Cosmopolitismo, cosmopolítica, postsoberanía, Wittgenstein

COSMOPOLITANISM

Cosmopolitanism is probably unavoidable, even when it is not viewed as desirable by most westerners today. In the past twenty-five centuries we saw a series of proposals on cosmopolitanism, mostly in the margin of local, regional or state logics. All of these cosmopolitan proposals were European, and –with hindsight   Eurocentric. That is to say, humankind was overwhelmingly conceived in European concepts: individuals with an individual conscience, rights attached to individuals exclusively, emphasizing the free will and the perfectability of the latter in recent times, and so on. In the present post-Christian and post-colonial era in Europe, the old Eurocentrism is being severely criticized within and outside of Europe. At the same time, globalization is influencing the mind-sets of people, and urbanization entails a substantial multiculturalization of the European populations and a push towards multiple and often shifting identities in the minds of people.

A net result of all these tendencies (decolonization, globalization, urbanization) is that the cosmopolitan projects of the past are increasingly rejected because of their Eurocentric perspective, and at the same time the interdependence between people on the scale of the whole planet grows. The latter forces us to think of global answers for problems that confront us all, as inhabitants of the earth: energy shortage, pollution, poverty, climate change, demographic expansion, and so on. That is to say, cosmopolitan ideas and actions on the latter issues are now urgent and unavoidable. But cosmopolitanism will most likely have to be stripped of its Eurocentric perspective in order to be recognized by all and to offer the political platform needed to confront the global problems mentioned. Sustainability and interdependence will probably be the guiding principles of negotiations that are decidedly intercultural and inclusive, instead of Eurocentric and religiously, culturally or ideologically exclusive.

At the same time and subsidiary to that global level, local and regional formats can and will emerge, focusing on more particularistic values, ideas and habits. There is room for what has been called 'cosmopolitics' here (Calhoun, 2003).

In my view, proposals that combine ideas on European identity of the subsidiary level (cosmopolitics) with those at the global level (cosmopolitan) are of the essence now. That is the predicament that we find ourselves in, as Europeans and as global citizens.   It should be clear that such a perspective implies that old habits and ideas should first of all be adopted and that education and political discourse will have to be redirected rather profoundly. Nationalism, regionalism and religious exclusivity are all outdated when they aim at a universalistic status, as they used to. The modesty and consciousness of position which a cosmopolitic stand entails is on a collision course with the old and still (in Europe) very vivid attitude of exclusion of other ways of life and projects of society in the religions of the book and in Eurocentric ideologies (nationalism and the like). The apparently different

logics of the EU Parliament proposal on ecology (with a clearly progressive cosmopolitan perspective: see Copenhagen 2009) and the success of exclusive identity parties in different European nation-states (see the elections in The Netherlands and in Belgium , leading to deadlocks in the political world) are for me an illustration of the points made here.

STRUCTURE AND PROCESS

One feature I want to single out in the Eurocentric formats is their (exclusive) structural focus: they attempt to speak within a logic of pre-established and unalterable structural units ranging from a community (for such political parties as Christian democrats - a Christian community- and rightist parties – a cultural community) over nation-states to the world as a whole. For example, the Christian and the Islamic religions claim to offer solutions for the human species as a whole. The religious community in those perspectives would have uniform structural characteristics, which are defined by the deity in the revealed will he made known through the prophets. In this mentality, difference is excluded: it is either seen as a primitive and not yet 'saved' way of existence (as pre-Christian or pre-Islamic) or as heresy (meaning a perversion or loss of the genuine human structure). Nationalism, on the other hand, supplanted this religious way of structuring life and society in Europe in the past centuries, while basically and structurally sticking with the same attitudes. In this case, the final or most decisive reference was and is the nation-state, with its presumed values, identities and habits, all of which are felt to be intrinsic and obvious such as to become second nature to the inhabitants. The wars between nation-states have enabled subsequent governments for at least two centuries to engrain this view on life and people, and to divide people by putting them in national or regional structures. The step towards a consciousness of interdependence on a global scale and shared interests rather than enmity between groups, is hampered by this history of divisiveness. In the actual search for an EU identity I recognize the inertia of the past structural format: the 'government' of the EU is the Commission, composed of a Commissioner from each Member State. They are appointed by nation-states and not elected. The Parliament is a European body, without legislative power, and elected within the confines of nation-states. There is no constituency spanning the EU as a whole, but there are political responsibilities which are defined for the whole complex. The logic in this is that the structures of the national level are basic, intrinsic or somehow more 'natural' or 'real' than the transversal aims , values and needs of the population living in the broad space of the EU, for whom the European governmental institutions are nevertheless working.

At the same time, the tremendous urbanization of recent decades (now reaching 60% of the world population, and in some areas of Western Europe over 80%, Castells, 2002) has the effect that former structural ties are rapidly weakening. This might indicate that their functionality is decreasing. Instead, people start developing what is called 'layered' or multiple identities (Hermans, 2004; Pinxten et al. 2004). With this comes a sense of the dynamic nature of religions and secular values and habits: people adopt a dialogical self (Hermans, o.c.) with a vague belief in some supernatural being, combined with a Newtonian world view, and spiritual adherence to some Buddhist tradition for one's wellbeing, and so on.

When I look at the European context through this lens, I can draw some surprising conclusions about the newly-emerging reality which is the EU. Against the historical background of factionalism, wars and religious exclusion, a peaceful but rather amorphous entity is emerging, held together by commercial interests. An open market and open space for goods and people, to a large extent. The question arises as to whether this is a political entity as yet, or whether it can and should be elaborated more. In the first place this means that this European space could organically grow into a coherent and well-defined state structure, a sort of super-state or empire. One important issue, then, is what indicators one could point at to conclude that such an organic emergence of an encompassing structure is or could be growing. To my mind, no such indicators are to be found. In the political practice of today, laid down in the structures of decision-making (Parliament, Council, etc.), national structures dominate. Power is to be had from and because of electorates within these national confines. Hence, the very idea that a larger unit –in a state-like form- would emerge organically or quasi-spontaneously, runs counter to this reality. It would clash with the real power, expressed in and constrained by the nation-state. For one thing, the existing structures and the procedures of decision-making should be altered substantially to allow for a larger structure to grow. No politician today is interested in breaking up national structures, because they define the power basis of that same politician. Idealism or voluntarism will probably not be enough to achieve that end.

POST-SOVEREIGN STATE AND THE EU

However, the picture drawn so far is one-sided. Indeed, over the past decades, and concurrent with the founding of the EU, the traditional nation-states have been drawn into a process of change, yielding what some have called 'post-sovereign states' as a result (Delanty, 2010). That is to say, the community (nation) and the state are gradually split

from one another and evolve in different directions. Also with globalization, the citizen lives within a state as a set of functions, rights and duties within a local territorial circumscription. Taxes are paid to a local structure in order to secure highways, a police force, and so on. On the other hand, the meaning of life is sought by the modern citizen in groups or communities which may be worldwide (such as a religion), or in a foreign context from one's territory, or in multiple identity groups which may range from a local sports club to a virtual international environment. No state can offer a comprehensive identity anymore, meaning that the 'community' aspects of the old nation-state are not defined by the state one of a citizen of anymore. Let me give some examples:

- The former Freemason would be a British Freemason, clearly distinguished from the French or the Belgian member of the same presumably universal community. Rituals, beliefs, constitutions would be different, even though the universality of the Brotherhood of Man was the first aim. Indeed, a European politicized and non-believing Masonry would be clearly different from a God obeying Anglo-Saxon tradition, to a point that one would not recognize the other as representative of the tradition. In recent years, heavily publicized, nationality defines less and less what Freemasonry would be, and principled recognition of all by all seems to be becoming the rule in new groups across all borders. In a similar sense, religious movements and political movements in the wake of globalization (such as the "Porto Allegre Movement") emphasize survival and 'meaning of life' issues over and above nation-states' boundaries; the sometimes violent clashes between nation-state police and the anti- (or other-) globalists testify to that effect.
- The younger generation develops networks of chatters and event visitors (Gay Parade and the like) which are not defined by, or even not referring to state identities or borders. Fashion, music preferences, lifestyle choices, but also knowledge exchange is going on much more through the Internet and other international communication channels today than through the traditional state structures. Or even more, part of the identity complex of a person today would be defined by local actions and habits, and other parts by national references. Finally, an important part is built up through international contacts, tastes, experiences, hopes, and so on.

One of the levels of identity in the mind-set of most citizens of European countries today is precisely that of the European space. My claim is that it would be short-sighted to try and force this new space in the structural frames we know from the imperial or the nation-state era. There is not one community in contemporary (as there basically was in the Christian era of Europe), but there is a growing variety of them, allowing for a mixed and varied identity complex in individuals: the modern European citizen is Christian/ Buddhist/Muslim/atheist/etc., and life styler, and citizen of a state and of a region, and

member of a gender group, and so on. In the wake of the emergence of post-sovereign states, communities grow more or less independent from state structures: where they had been practically totally overlapping in the nation-state, they are now growing apart to a considerable extent. In that process it is not yet clear what tasks or functions will remain with the state structure (taxes, defence, but also social security?) and what will the typical focus of the many communities be. To my understanding we are in the midst of a period where this reshuffling of tasks and functions is underway.

My suggestion is to look at the European space as a unique new phenomenon, and not to reduce it to the former structures. I call for an interpretation of the new space as the sum of interactions and communications which transcend the structural formats and boundaries of the lower levels of extension. In other words, what emerges as transregional and transnational actions and communications. Since the latter are processual rather than merely structural, it is preferable to think of the set of them in terms of change and temporary structurings rather than invariants and fixed structures. Politically speaking, this means that Europe could be conceptualized primarily as the sum of all such actions and communications, rather than (and mostly regardless of) static political structures. Within such a view, difference can be seen as more intrinsic and less bothersome than in the old nation-state view: the identities can be expected to be less stable and rock-bottom in a space consisting of actions and communications than in a space defined by tight borders and well-defined structural characteristics. In other words, essentialism and doctrinal fundamentalism should be appreciated as more awkward in such an open and shifting space than in a static one. The fact that extreme rightist parties in the present EU Parliament all show an anti-EU attitude is significant in this respect. Of course, this does not imply that I believe in a simple and straightforward dichotomy of the kind 'pro-Europe is good' and 'anti-Europe is bad'. Oversimplifications are never to be advocated. Still, it remains striking that reactionary positions in present-day Europe vow against change and hence against dealing with difference, which finds them in an uneasy existential and political position in a deeply urbanized (and hence mixed) and post-national European space. My plea consists of thinking this predicament one step further and turning to the nature of communication and interaction, in order to further define the characteristics of this European space.

After many centuries of discussion on the nature of language, Wittgenstein forced a breakthrough in his 'Philosophical Investigations' (1957) by shifting the discussion away from language structure and moving it to language as a form of communication. In his slipstream he allowed for a rapprochement between researchers on language and on action. The speech act theory (emanating from Austin, but coming to full bloom in Searle 1966) turned things upside down and started looking at action as the generic category, with language as a subcategory. Wittgenstein's focus on language as communication forced him (and all of us) to realize that vagueness and changes in meaning is of the essence to enable

communication. If we have 100% clarity in meaning, as is sometimes claimed for mathematical terms, there is no room for communication. Natural language has this wonderful and important feature that meaning is vague, that the borders of the meaning of a word or a phrase are fuzzy and that hence communication happens. The more people are involved, and the more contexts and histories are touched upon in the process of communication, the more communication and interaction occurs in order to reach sufficient understanding on issues that (seem to) matter (Gellner, 1999). Wittgenstein learned these insights the hard way: after trying in vain to walk the solipsistic road on private language, defining exact meaning through exploration of one's inner voice (in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*) he abandoned this when it proved utterly impossible to engage in communication this way (see especially Gellner's analysis, 1999). I want to draw an analogy -however risky analogies might be- with the political arena. Where nationalism looked like a possible self-defining in an era when the citizens of the nation-states saw themselves as a (social political) entity all by themselves, it is only a hindrance in the context of Europe as a conglomerate of tens of such entities. Moreover, with globalization and urbanization the mixed nature of populations forces every citizen to recognize vagueness of boundaries and open-endedness of communication and interaction. In such a context, vagueness becomes an asset for coping with diversity, where it may have been perceived as a failure to cope in the closed environment of the nation-state. That is to say, in the nation-state, community (yielding identity) and state may have collapsed for a certain period, but in the post-sovereign state of the European space they drift apart, and any attempt to restrict communication and interaction to the old tight nation-state format will cause only growing frustration and inadequacy. Vagueness (because of openendedness) and breaking away from solipsism is crucial for the viability of the new context. Hence, trying to define the new European space in state-structural terms is a mistake, since one thus belies the basically communicative and interactional character of it.

POLICY ISSUES

This thoroughly dynamic interpretation of Europe has implications for policy-makers. My suggestion on the nature of Europe as a complex of dynamic features implies that policy-makers should recognize this dynamic nature and rule accordingly. In practice, they should then focus more on facilitating communication and interaction, on defining constraints which allow for and eventually invite optimal communication and interaction rather than define their inalterable nature.

One issue which is predominant now in political discussions in this part of the world deals with our apparent incapability to deal with diversity. After policies of assimilation, integration, green-card citizenship and so on, it is becoming clear that foreigners and immigrants are still not accepted as full human beings in Europe, notwithstanding the fact that all European states agreed to sign the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The mentality of the citizen did not evolve in unison with this signature. Neither did it fully adapt to the internal European space as one of mixedness and difference, rather than uniformity and single-value systems. Intercultural education, exchange of people and ideas regardless of background and ideology, and promotion of programmes of collaboration and interaction seem more than ever of primary importance. Here lies an important role for politicians. It is important, since none of the points mentioned here are in any way frustrating national ideals or habits, and all of them focus almost exclusively on the types of concerns that are crucial for the European space as such.

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