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Cosmopolitanism, neoliberalism and global history

by:

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Despite the common imperative of many global historians to do away with teleologies and grand narratives, the global history project has developed a singular and linear progressivism of its own. The ambition to explain global integration between and beyond the nation-state has so far meant privileging movement, exchange and border-crossing at the expense of the sedentary and the locally-embedded. From Ibn Battuta to Zheng He, unprecedented attention is afforded to those who embody openness and mobility against the grain of traditional history, chiming with contemporary liberal and multicultural values. Chronicles of the transnational — of networks, flows and constellations — are saturated with an economistic interpretation of human existence in conjunction with a projection of present-day cosmopolitan ethics onto the past. The uncritical assumption that “connectedness is part of the human condition” posits a kind of cosmopolitan essence that somehow transcends historical change.¹

The necessity of a meta-narrative of cosmopolitan integration on a planetary scale, designed to “meet the needs of our globalising world” was indeed a founding statement of LSE’s Patrick O’Brien when he introduced us to the *Journal of Global History* back in 2006.² Whilst it may be too much to suggest that O’Brien personally inaugurated the proselytising impulse of global history to explain and celebrate humanity’s fundamental interdependence and interconnectivity, the cosmopolitan meta-narrative he puts forward can be traced in the key assumptions and methods employed by many globally-minded historians.

Confronting the limits of this vision has become almost automatic for the historian residing in a world of resurgent nativism and alter-globalisation. But this critique must go further than Jeremy Adelman’s prescription to “reckon with disintegration as well as integration”, which merely complicates reigning teleological narratives when what is needed is a reconstruction from the bottom up.³ Historicising the ebb and flow of the global cosmopolis helps us explain moments of disintegration, but we are left with the question of whether the global cosmopolitan ideal truly lives up to its universal promise. Why is the cosmopolite, the *homo globus*, first and foremost an individual? Why is their freedom measured in connectivity, to other individuals but also to capital? Why are their actions so often rendered in the bland, managerial language of transfers, consumption and entrepreneurship? And, most crucially, why do we

1 John Darwin, “Globe and Empire” in Maxine Berg, ed., *Writing the History of the Global: Challenges for the 21st Century* (Oxford, 2013), 198.

2 Patrick O’Brien, “Historical traditions and modern imperatives for the restoration of global history”, *Journal of Global History*, 1, no. 1 (2006), 3-39.

3 Jeremy Adelman, “Is Global History Still Possible, or Has It Had its Moment?”, *Aeon* (2017), <https://aeon.co/essays/is-global-history-still-possible-or-has-it-had-its-moment> (accessed 12/04/2019).

get the increasing feeling that such formulations are losing explanatory power in the present? Without understanding the politics and hierarchies inscribed in the cosmopolitan vision, we are blind to its co-option by a specific ideological programme, that of neoliberalism.

To reforge our cosmopolitan ideals we must first come to terms with a tacit agreement between neoliberal ideology and the societies that have for more than three decades consented to its hegemony. As described by the cultural theorist Jeremy Gilbert, the bargain struck by neoliberalism — particularly the ‘Third Way’ tradition carried by Tony Blair, Bill Clinton and Gerhard Schröder — enabled the simultaneous liberation of society and economy with privatised individualism as its organising principle.⁴ The idealised subject of this project is the cosmopolite, an individual whose existence is configured by freedom and opportunity, unbounded by oppression, discrimination or market regulation. This too is the idealised subject of global history.

[H]istorians who have committed (albeit as conscripts or collaborators) to this cosmopolitan enterprise ... find themselves at an intellectual frontier unbounded by geographies, hemispheres and continents, let alone national borders and parish boundaries.⁵

Back in 2006 when he introduced the *Journal of Global History*, Patrick O’Brien was remarkably explicit about the terms of this neoliberal compromise. The promise is clear enough: history could finally be liberated from methodological nationalism as long as it played ball with neoliberal cosmopolitanism, a grand narrative which O’Brien describes as universal. Indeed, by celebrating the collaboration of historians with this “enterprise” (which, for the *Journal of Global History*, began with a large Leverhulme grant in 2003) he indicates acquiescence towards the academic integrity that could be lost in the process. Elsewhere, Sebastian Conrad speaks of global history’s “catering” to an audience of middle-class, capital-wielding global citizens.⁶ Catering has indeed been a fruitful activity for history departments that seize upon the magnetism of the global, drawing wider interest from students and scholars but also from politicians and grant-giving foundations. This has led scholars like Rebecca Karl to claim with some justice that the neoliberal compromise is the “back

4 Jeremy Gilbert, “The Crisis of Cosmopolitanism”, Stuart Hall Foundation (2017), <http://stuarthallfoundation.org/library/the-crisis-of-cosmopolitanism/> (accessed 12/04/2019).

5 O’Brien, “Historical traditions”, 4.

6 Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?* (Princeton, 2016), 209.

door” through which global history is “smuggling normative capitalist modernisation into the centre of the narrative.”⁷

Is this what we desired, what we still desire of global history? That, in return decentring and decolonising historical writing we must also subscribe to a teleology of progress towards a globalised world of capitalist individualism? This is of course also a world of openness, multiculturalism and intersectional liberation — a world we want and thus a world we must validate historically. But under neoliberalism the cosmopolitan template is cast in an individualised mould that is already crumbling under the burden of our collective needs and interests. By empowering the private and mobile individual, cosmopolitanism disempowers those who can’t move, those who rely on public institutions, and those who lack the means to benefit from the economic freedoms we have continually been promised. Fully subsumed by the global, the local can no longer hold it accountable, and if it tries it risks the charge of backwardness and parochialism. Far from being post-Other, this cosmopolitanism has created new Others.

Comparable to the collection of movements and organisations — like the World Social Forum and the Occupy movement — that have been termed alter-global, what we must pursue is not an outright dismissal of global history but a fundamental change in its direction of travel. We must work to restore the local as a material historical reality, a site of working-class solidarity and cross-community interaction that can productively and democratically incorporate global change. At the same time, we must differentiate this critique of neoliberalism from the reactionary rhetoric of the far-right, whose hollow idea of the local is defined in specific opposition to multiculturalism and migration, often flirting with dangerous antisemitic tropes of ‘rootless cosmopolitans’ and ‘cultural Marxists’. Alter-globalisation movements tend to seek mediation and collaboration between the local and global, rather than the vengeance of the former against the latter. Within our discipline, we certainly can appreciate the worthwhile outcomes of marshalling local histories against the hegemony of master narratives, particularly as a countervailing force to globalisation’s homogenising tendencies. But an egalitarian and democratic history needs to work on both scales, towards a broader understanding of their dialectical relationship.

As Kerwin Lee Klein has made artfully clear, both iterations of ‘history’ entail a kind of universal vision, making claims as they do to an authoritative understanding of the past based on the best scales and apertures available. Time and again, he says, “we anxiously affirm our

⁷ Rebecca Karl, “What is World History? A Critique of Pure Ideology” in Tina Mai Chen (ed.), *The Material of World History* (London, 2015), 19.

clean break with the evils of narrative mastery”, renewing a dichotomy of the great and small — the Hegelian historied and unhistoried — that helps “burden our new tales with the bad, old metaphysics we claim to have escaped.”⁸ Perhaps a truly novel metaphysics would recognise the multi-scalar nature of the universal and its multiplicity of interpretations and reifications — cosmopolitanism being one among many. What we must pay attention to is the politics of how universal narratives are configured, shifting our gaze to join our ordering of history umbilically with the power relations of the present.

And what we find, probing into the universalising tendencies of neoliberal cosmopolitanism, is disempowerment as a widespread political reality. The radical alterations experienced by so many communities in the wake of capital-led globalisation appear to those left behind as a gross manifestation of invisible market forces and abstract liberal values. For those alienated and Othered by neoliberal cosmopolitanism, animosity towards the global proceeds directly from its utterly unaccountable presence in their lives. This sentiment is only sharpened as the Other faces material and moral exclusion from supposedly cosmopolitan society. A decade of political fallout and resurgent nativism has exposed the false universalisms of the neoliberal project, and now urges us to reconsider the cosmopolitan assumptions that still hold hegemony in the global political mainstream.

“It would be a mistake”, as Gilbert claims however, “to throw out the cosmopolitan baby with the neoliberal bathwater”, leaving us with the critical task of restoring democracy and collectivism to the cosmopolitan project.⁹ What does this mean for the global historian? It means, in a broad sense, disentangling the neoliberal compromise tacitly made during global history’s formation in the early 21st century. We must strip the wolf of the sheep’s clothing by differentiating democratic and inclusive cosmopolitanism from the parochial and atomised vision projected by neoliberal narratives under the cover of universality. This may sound like an abstract task of the political imagination but that is far from the case: collective cosmopolitanism is a historical reality that has enriched and empowered the lives of ordinary citizens and continues to do so even in the face of neoliberal globalisation. There is a critical role to be played here by the writing of global histories which cherish, to follow Stuart Hall, a cosmopolitanism based “in locatedness, in position, attachment.” Part of the Windrush generation of African-Caribbean migration to the UK, Hall’s life was deeply configured by cosmopolitanism and he remained until

8 Kerwin Lee Klein, “In Search of Narrative Mastery: Postmodernism and the People without History”, *History and Theory*, 34, No. 4 (1995), 276-277.

9 Jeremy Gilbert, “The Crisis of Cosmopolitanism”.

his recent death one of its most influential and optimistic advocates. He knew the danger of a cosmopolitan ethics that veers too close to market abstractions and that claims "we can only really calculate what individuals are like when we free them from all their attachments: no religion, no culture, nothing."¹⁰ For Hall, as for Gilbert, actually-existing cosmopolitanism is where connectedness and interdependence equate to democracy and collectivity, straddling the global and the local even within the ageing paradigms of methodological nationalism.

Looking to the futures of global history, we must be unashamed in our pursuit of a new universalism, one which appreciates the inevitable hybridity of multi- and inter-cultural societies and the horizons of liberation that can only be reached collectively and democratically on a global scale. The aim is not to construct a universal narrative that transcends history — none can — but rather to take seriously the power that cosmopolitanism and other universal histories can hold in the present.

¹⁰ Stuart Hall in conversation with Pnina Werbner, *Film Interviews with Leading Thinkers* (Cambridge, 2006), <https://www.sms.cam.ac.uk/media/1119965> (accessed 12/04/2019); David Morley and Bill Schwarz, "Stuart Hall Obituary", *The Guardian* (2014), <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/feb/10/stuart-hall> (accessed 12/04/2019)