
Review

The humble cosmopolitan: Rights, diversity, and trans-state democracy

Luis Cabrera

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Cosmopolitanism is a political philosophy that many are attracted to, but it has its costs. Why wouldn't one want to realize a vision of the state based upon the equality of humans, separated from the contingencies of culture and geographic area? Disassociating sovereignty from local agents and histories, however, inevitably raises practical and theoretical problems, not the least of which deal with vast differences in how individuals are treated in various cultural contexts. Yet the value of the equality and its political implications still beckon many theorists and activists. Luis Cabrera's book, *The Humble Cosmopolitan*, represents a valuable and creative entry into recent debates concerning the possibilities of cosmopolitanism in a global community often divided by cultural schisms. One of the book's chief virtues is that it brings the renowned Indian thinker, activist, and politician Bhimrao Ambedkar into a discussion that so often revolves around rectifying social injustice.

Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891–1956) was an important figure both preceding and following Indian independence. He was a Dalit (*Marathi* for 'crushed,' a label that serves now as a self-chosen replacement for 'untouchable') and was subject to crushing caste-based forms of oppression and social exclusion. After his initial education in the west between 1913 and 1917, Ambedkar engaged in decades of legal activism that empowered the millions of India's most oppressed groups. But as Cabrera's book demonstrates, Ambedkar should not be considered only as a *Dalit* thinker – he was a political theorist in the most general sense, working out notions of democracy, equality, and oppression that apply to caste as well as other forms of discrimination. Consequently, Cabrera's book will intrigue both those interested in Ambedkar as an anti-caste intellectual *and* those concerned with the challenges of situating cosmopolitan political theory within comparative contexts.

The scheme of Cabrera's book instantiates this engagement with Ambedkar as political theorist. Ambedkar's visions of democracy and equality, both in his overtly political writings and in his re-readings of Buddhism in the 1950s, serve as



a way for Cabrera to surface the central tension at work in the debates over cosmopolitanism: the opposition between arrogance and humility. These sound like concepts straight out of moral psychology – and they are – but in Cabrera’s hands they become themes in debates about cosmopolitanism. In chapters 2 and 3 Cabrera explores Ambedkar’s writings and speeches as a body of work for insights into the way these psychological traits inflect political systems. Ambedkar’s thought is found to be particularly useful in its critique of caste arrogance, a religiously inspired habit of dominating others and devaluing their concerns that transitions easily to the forms of cosmopolitanism that override local concerns and specific cultural contexts. What Cabrera is searching for is a form of ‘humble’ cosmopolitanism, and he argues that Ambedkar’s view of political humility, animated as it is by a sense of ‘high equality’, can lead the way to such a creative new vision of trans-state democracy. Ambedkar’s respect for each individual as worthy of value and consideration, combined with his interest in fraternity (or *maitri*, as he puts it in its Buddhist terminology), represents a way to give voice to equal, if not always agreeing, citizens across a range of interacting states. This is the sort of psychology of cosmopolitanism that would promote the goal desired by Ambedkar and so many other theorists: reciprocal recognition.

One of the more important features of Cabrera’s book is the fact that it does not remain an exposition of Ambedkar’s philosophy. Such expositions are undoubtedly valuable, as the west has too often excluded Dalit voices and experiences (viz. of caste oppression) from its accounts of social justice and injustice. Discourses of anti-colonialism do not capture the horrors and mechanisms of caste oppression; in some ways, they may push us toward concerns that elide caste. Cabrera’s hybrid work, however, is as useful as it is unique – it places anti-caste thought as a part of our growing understanding of the ways oppression can take hold, and it places a richer idea of democracy and equal recognition in front of us.

In chapter 4, Cabrera surveys a range of approaches to democracy, and ultimately siding with instrumental over intrinsic accounts. Instrumental approaches to democracy allow for values like equality to animate political institutions and interaction but stop short of the arrogance that accompanies the strong epistemological groundings evident in intrinsic approaches. The political humility that Cabrera extracts from Ambedkar can serve cosmopolitanism by rendering it less prone to charges of ethnocentrism, cultural exclusion of groups and individuals, and arrogance. Cabrera’s synthetic inclinations do not end with Ambedkar’s consideration as a political theorist. In chapters 5 and 6, he explicates his commitment to grounded normative theory, an approach that emphasizes a useful dialectic between moral and political theory and the often-messy world of political actors and what they believe and assert. Using the example of contemporary appeals for international concern over caste oppression in India made by prominent Dalit leaders and organizations, Cabrera explores the ways that states and trans-state democracies can be accused of political arrogance. Using a



rich data set based on ethnographic interviews with activists associated with the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR), Cabrera explores how parts of Ambedkar's notion of equality and fraternity are used, extended, or modified by agents actively fighting for 'vertical' recognition beyond India's borders.

Later in the book, Cabrera places his theory of humble cosmopolitanism in conversation with contemporary accounts given by theorists such as Martha Nussbaum and Simon Caney, among others. Using his grounded approach to normative theorizing, Cabrera utilizes data gathered from a range of interviews with Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders and activists focusing on concerns of parochialism emerging in the debates over the recognition of Dalit rights. His sympathy to the diversity of views and arguments provided by his respondents is commendable, and Cabrera's engagement with on-the-ground actors and activists further fleshes out the risks of cosmopolitan arrogance when international actors advocate notions of rights and equal respect from remote distances.

The final chapters return to the world of practice by exploring two case studies of conflict in cosmopolitan politics: the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union ('Brexit') and the Turkish response to the chance of accession to the EU. Of particular focus in these examples was the concern – one that is still on-going – about the ability of politicians in Brussels to dictate policy for citizens of distinct nations far removed. These case studies, especially that of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), reveal the important challenges that any account of cosmopolitanism must meet at levels of both theory and practice. The practical import of such comparative political theorizing must not be overlooked. How can one persuade individuals to give up local control of matters such as immigration, defense, and economic policy, and, in short, some amount of their autonomy, all in the name of larger cosmopolitan ideals? While he does not provide the practical or political answer to such a worry, Cabrera does note that the best path available starts by theorizing a sense of 'humble' cosmopolitanism, an account that will emphasize human equality as a useful ideal and aspiration. It will also value fraternity and community building through mechanisms of critique and reform. Cabrera's cosmopolitanism, to use a stoic metaphor, relies less on the closed fist and more on the open hand in its engagement with its subjects.

Cabrera's *The Humble Cosmopolitanism* is an ambitious and insightful book. It attempts to solve long-standing concerns in political theory in new ways. The entwining of normative theory with ethnographic research is important, and something we ought to see more of in comparative political thought. The inclusion of Ambedkar as a political theorist is of vital import. First, Ambedkar helps us undo the lack of voices accurately representing and enunciating the experiences of caste and caste oppression in political theory and philosophy. Engaging and drawing from Ambedkar's wide-ranging writings is a way to ensure Dalit thinkers are taken seriously as equal voices in discussions over such matters as cosmopolitanism. Second, building on Ambedkar's legacy with methods such as in-depth interviews



is another way to bring contemporary voices – including those traditionally excluded from the elite practices of scholarship – into our deliberations. Interviews of various activists and political leaders can capture other voices further removed from the textual haunts of scholars and theorists. Whereas some might wish that Cabrera’s work spent more time on Ambedkar, or more space on recent theories of trans-state democracies, I found the balancing act to be more than satisfactory. Cabrera’s book brings Ambedkar’s complex thought into the new arena of cosmopolitan theorizing, all the while leaving room to augment the problematics it navigates with the concerns of individuals in India, Europe, and beyond struggling over the challenges inherent in diverse communities.

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