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Liberal Cosmopolitanism: What's in a Name?

Comments on Chandler

Bart van Leeuwen

Radboud University Nijmegen

I have learned a great deal from this rich argument, especially with regard to the analysis of the position that David Chandler refers to as “radical poststructuralist” and the problems with it that he so clearly analyses, sometimes with a biting but appropriate sense of sarcasm. However, the way that he criticises the other family of theories regarding the alleged emergence of a post-territorial political community, namely the liberal cosmopolitan position, is less convincing. And the main reason for this is that it is doubtful that the portrayal of this perspective on cosmopolitanism is inclusive enough, given the internal diversity of theories and positions that seem to be covered by the label “liberal cosmopolitanism.”

I believe Chandler does *not demonstrate* that, in general: 1) liberal cosmopolitanism rejects state-based political community in favour of global networked civil society; 2) liberal cosmopolitanism undermines the modern liberal conception of the rights bearing subject, and; 3) liberal cosmopolitanism sidelines the electorate as being irrelevant for the establishment of progressive ends.

The question that his argument (and the way that it is framed) raises is this: To what extent is Chandler's representation of liberal cosmopolitanism accurate? To what extent does it exclude articulations of liberal cosmopolitanism, namely those that do not rest on a functioning global civil society and that do take questions of representation and forms of non-state based democracy seriously?

To start with, let us take a recent example, namely Simon Caney's *Justice Beyond Borders*.¹ In this book, Caney argues for a cosmopolitan political morality on the basis of liberal premises. Yet Chandler's critique of liberal cosmopolitanism does not seem to hold on several points. First of all, Caney rejects the claim “that cosmopolitan political institutions are unnecessary because global civil society is sufficient” (*ibid*, p. 172). Caney provides several arguments for this. One of these arguments seems especially relevant given Chandler's irritation with the suggestion that global civil society is characterized by “public/global/ethical *debate*,” a suggestion that he ascribes to liberal cosmopolitanism. Chandler deems this claim to be a case of intellectual dishonesty for the reason that there is no debate in any meaningful sense of the term in deterritorialized global space (Chandler, pp. 11-12). Caney, however, would agree. The reason that Caney argues for the establishment of glo-

1. Simon Caney, *Justice Beyond Borders: A Global Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

bal political structures is precisely that these are necessary to facilitate meaningful discussion, argument and debate across national borders.

Secondly, concerning the democratic deficit of the networked conceptions of the post-territorial political community – the fact that NGO's that constitute this community, together with social movements and other non-state actors, claim to represent the people, without an electorate –, Caney's position seems to defy again the somewhat generalized notion of liberal cosmopolitanism that Chandler works with. To quote Caney again: "the case for an active civil society gives us no reason to abandon the right-based case for supra-state political institutions for it cannot ensure that all are able to exercise control over the institutions that impact on their rights" (*ibid.*, 172).

For this reason, Caney argues for global political institutions that are more democratically accountable (such as a reformed UN, EU, WTO, IMF, and World Bank) and for a system of multi-level governance in which a political community on the state level is not simply abandoned.² This raises the question to what extent Chandler is really arguing with liberal cosmopolitanism, which Caney affiliates himself with, or rather with a more limited family of approaches that we could refer to as "civil society cosmopolitanism."

Another counterexample to Chandler's identification of liberal cosmopolitanism with these networked, global civil society approaches is David Held. It would take a rather extreme form of selective reading to pigeon-hole Held into the camp of civil society cosmopolitanism. Held argues that national democracies require international democracy if they are to be sustained and developed in the contemporary era. The belief that democracy is served simply by having states which elect governments is undermined, according to Held, by the interdependent character of the modern world. There are many supra-national organizations that seriously and progressively diminish the range of decisions open to national majorities.

Hence Held argues not for simply cherishing "global civil society," but for a cosmopolitan model of democracy, with regional parliaments, general referendums cutting across nation and nation-states, and the opening up of international governmental organizations to public scrutiny and democratization. Held stresses that these changes assume the entrenchment of a cluster of rights, including civil, political, economical and social rights, in order to provide shape and limits to democratic decision making.³

Again my question: to what extent is Chandler's representation of liberal cosmopolitanism fair to these types of positions? Is his notion of liberal cosmopolitanism – and now I will put it a bit stronger – simply a straw man? If so, he has failed to really demonstrate that liberal cosmopolitanism works with a notion of

2. See for instance Caney's – though heavily qualified – acceptance of national self-determination (*ibid.*, pp. 178 ff.).

3. See amongst others, David Held, "Democracy: From City-States to a Cosmopolitan Order," in Robert Goodin and Philip Pettit (eds.), *Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Blackwell, 2006), pp. 674-696.

“democracy without formal representation” or that the electorate is being sidelined in liberal cosmopolitanism as irrelevant for the establishment of progressive ends or that “political community necessarily takes a territorial form at the level of the organization for political representation on the basis of the nation state” (Chandler, pp. 7, 12)?

That does not imply that I believe that democracy on a supra-state level is easy to bring about or even possible. I just doubt whether the impossibility of this normative ideal has been convincingly questioned here. For not only do Caney and Held work with a rights-based approach to global political institutions, but also do they argue for the importance of democratic accountability thereof. And neither of them simply rejects state based political community in favour of, naively, going global.

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Since the 1990s there has been a notable surge of interest in the subject of cosmopolitanism in a variety of disciplines, from philosophy, literary theory, and cultural studies; to political theory and international relations; to most recently international law. Various influences, including the accretion of meanings and associations, have shaped the term since its coinage in fourth-century b.c.e. Greece. Drawing much of its inspiration from the work of Kant on cosmopolitanism and informed by Rawls's thought on distributive justice, the resulting literature has proved rich and diverse. The question "whose cosmopolitanism?" is also a question about the complex genealogies and dynamics of cosmopolitan discourses and practices. It is imperative to broaden the field of theoretical enquiry and examine the origins of modern discourses of cosmopolitanism in conjunction with the origins of capitalism. I believe that current theoretical work on cosmopolitanism largely brackets off this contradictory genealogy. A team of HSE researchers—Nataliya Matveeva, Ivan Sterligov, and Maria Yudkevich—have analyzed the research activity of universities participating in Russia's Academic Excellence Project 5-100. Overall, the quality of publications of these universities has improved. This article critically re-evaluates certain blind spots in the debate on the possibility of a cosmopolitan political community. It does so by addressing certain key areas where, in my view, remaining conceptual misunderstandings prevent a full articulation of the conflicting positions. In particular, I concentrate on the ontological differences between liberalism and poststructuralism which, as long as they are not laid plain, distort the exchange of ideas on the nature of the political and on the issues of identity, recognition and exclusion. I contend that in poststructuralist ontology an