

Research Proposal

SPACES OF COSMOPOLITANISM

A postcolonial perspective towards the construction of critical geographies of cosmopolitanism for our planetary futures (1500-present)

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ABSTRACT

If today our future as a species is in danger, the Indian writer Amitav Ghosh warns us in his pathbreaking book *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021), the causes of our contemporary planetary crisis must be traced back to the discovery of the New World. In recent decades, the term «cosmopolitanism» has re-emerged as a key concept in political-geographical sciences. Within the current global political conjuncture, a broad anthropological, geographical, political and cultural literature has recently sought to reclaim cosmopolitanism as a progressive political philosophy. Through a geo-historical analysis, this research project aims to develop critical geographies of cosmopolitanism from a postcolonial perspective.

KEYWORDS: Critical Cosmopolitanism, Political Philosophy, Geography, Difference, Space

1. The state of the art

In the current political conjuncture, that is a period of open hegemonic transition (ARRIGHI 2007; MEZZADRA 2023), arguably in a «cosmopolitan condition» (BECK 2007), the term «cosmopolitanism» has re-emerged as a key concept in the political-geographical sciences and as a progressive political philosophy both within western and non-western political thought. Recent studies on cosmopolitanism can be found among geographers (COSGROVE 2001; HARVEY 2009; JAZEEL 2007, 2011; TUAN 1996; WARF 2021), among some western and non-western intellectuals who have contributed to the development of postcolonial approaches (CHAKRABARTY 2000, 2015; BRECKENRIDGE, POLLOCK, BHABHA AND CHAKRABARTY 2002; CHATTERJEE 1993; MEHTA 1999; BENHABIB 2004, 2006), and, more in general, in the intellectual, philosophical and political landscape over the last decades (BECK 2002, 2003, 2006, 2007; BALIBAR 2014, 2022; ARCHIBUGI 2003, 2009; DERRIDA 1997; NUSSBAUM 1994, 1996, 1997; PAGDEN 2000; ZOLO 1995; APPIAH 1996, 2005; VERTOVEC, COHEN 2002; CHEAH, ROBBINS 1998; BRENNAN 1997; HELD 2005, 2010; POGGE 2008; GILROY 2004; SASSEN 2006; SCUCCIMARRA 2006). A study on cosmopolitanism in recent literature can reveal new conceptions of cosmopolitanism: it can be a political project, the «cosmopolitan democracy» (ARCHIBUGI 2009) or the «cosmopolitan order» (HELD 2005), a moral philosophy (NUSSBAUM 1996; APPIAH 2005), a way of being (POLLOCK et al. 2002: 12), a postcolonial disposition (GILROY 2004), and a methodological approach to the study of social sciences and humanities (BECK 2002). For the political philosopher Martha Nussbaum (1994), cosmopolitanism may be a pedagogic necessity in the development of political strategies to be used against nationalism and patriotism. In a later work (1996), she insists on the construction of a «moral cosmopolitanism» that challenges a cosmopolitanism based on national identities, local rationalities, loyalties, cultures and practices, that emphasises the responsibilities of a «global citizenship». The political philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah (2005) calls for a «rooted cosmopolitanism». The historian and sociologist Paul Gilroy (2004) sheds light on the necessity of a «cosmopolitanism from below». The political thinker Uday Singh Metha (1999), recovering the ideas of the eighteenth century British political philosopher Edmund Burke (1729-1797), has reconceptualized something that he calls «cosmopolitanism of sentiments», that would stand against the «cosmopolitanism of reason» of the Enlightenment. The intellectual strategy of the Indian historians to redefine cosmopolitanism beyond its western imperial heritage is to «provincialize» Europe (CHAKRABARTY 2000), bringing the tenets of cosmopolitanism outside the closed box within which the western cultural imperialism kept it locked. However, as noted by the geographer David Harvey (2009), these recent studies on cosmopolitanism have contributed to the proliferation of many different «cosmopolitanisms» that «confuse rather than clarify political-economic and cultural-scientific agendas.» (HARVEY 2009: 78).

The history of cosmopolitanism begins in Ancient Greece and with the political philosophy of Stoicism. It was the Stoics that first invented the term, and they were the first to identify themselves explicitly as cosmopolitans, «*kosmou politeis*», that means «citizens of the world». In the Ancient world, the Stoics tried to replace the role played by the «*polis*» with that of a «cosmos» in which all human beings could live harmoniously together on earth. The Stoics were totally indifferent to the concept of place, and perceived themselves «at home in the world» (BRENNAN 1997). The cosmopolitan philosophy of the Stoics tried to transform the world into their city, their homeland into the world, and that was the

space of their «cosmos». Since its inception, cosmopolitanism has affirmed itself as a universalist political philosophy that promotes the idea of a world in which all human beings identify themselves as «citizens of the world», being part of the same «*oikumene*», while developing a common planetary consciousness. The political philosophy of the Stoics and the western intellectuals of modernity (cosmographers, geographers and mapmakers of Europe) saw in the contemplation of the globe from above, the «Apollonian gaze», «a powerful vehicle for articulating its reflections on the nature of life, its critique of human affairs, and its disinterested search for moral precepts.» (COSGROVE 2001: 51-52). Long before human beings had the ability to photograph the earth from space, images of the earth surface represented as a spherical globe had captured popular imagination and were part of a western cosmopolitan imagination. The imperial *Apollo's eye* of western intellectualism imposed «a divine and mastering view from a single perspective. [...] radiating power across the global surface from a sacred center, locating and projecting human authority imperially.» (COSGROVE 2001: XI). It is because of these representations and geographical imaginations (GREGORY 1994) representing the earth surface as an undifferentiated spherical globe, Cosgrove argues, that the ideals of cosmopolitanism and globalization had originated their ethical, moral and political power.

The history of cosmopolitanism, from its origins in the classical age to the eighteenth century and by analysing as well interesting thinkers such as Seneca, Dante (with his *Universal Monarchy*), Bartolomé de Las Casas, Francis Bacon, Michel de Montaigne and Guillaume-Thomas Raynal, just to name a few, has been concisely reviewed by Luca Scuccimarra (2006). But the geographical imaginations of cosmopolitanism have been drastically rewritten by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Kant is important for three main reasons: his project for a perpetual peace, connected to his conception of the cosmopolitan right, and these two embedded within his fixed and undialectical geography (HARVEY 2009; MAY 1970; QUAINI 1974). Kant reinvented cosmopolitanism, transforming it from an ethical principle, or a model for political identity, to a «right», making it a legal principle of the territorial nation-states. If in the Stoic tradition, cosmopolitanism simply meant being citizens of the world (a non-territorialized conception), with the Kantian conception of cosmopolitanism this political philosophy came to be «territorialized», and ended up getting tied to the political projects of the cosmopolitans of European modernity searching for a perpetual peace. Indeed, western cosmopolitan thought has run aground on the war-peace nexus. Kantian cosmopolitanism was not seen as an unconditional right in the first place: it was instead circumscribed by Article 3 of Kant's *Definitive Articles* to «the condition of universal hospitality» (KANT 1795: 188), meaning the right for all humans to ask foreigners to enter and visit their societies.

2. Description of the proposal

In the midst of the collapse of French economy during the revolutionary France, on November 25th, 1790, the Count of Custine, general Adam Philippe (1740-1793), addressed to the French National Assembly: «Will this Assembly, which has destroyed all kinds of aristocracy, flinch before the aristocracy of capitalists, these cosmopolitans whose only fatherland is the one in which they can pile up their riches?» (BRAUDEL 1981: 234, quoted in ARRIGHI, SILVER 1999: 166) In 1791 the French revolutionary savant Constantin-François Volney (1757-1820) published his *The Ruins; Or, Meditations on the Revolutions of Empires, and The Law of Nature* (1791, 1991). It is a treatise of world history and

its most famous passage is a dialogue between the «People» and the «Privileged Class»:

PEOPLE: And what labor do you perform in our society?

PRIVILEGED CLASS: None; we are not made to work.

PEOPLE: How, then, have you acquired these riches?

PRIVILEGED CLASS: By taking the pains to govern you.

PEOPLE: What! is this what you call governing? We toil and you enjoy! we produce and you dissipate! Wealth proceeds from us, and you absorb it. Privileged men! class who are not the people; form a nation apart, and govern yourselves.

(VOLNEY 1791, quoted in LINEBAUGH, REDIKER 2000: 341)

Hidden historical, human and social geographies of another, «critical» cosmopolitanism were materialistically taking place around the world: in the revolutionary Atlantic of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, slaves, sailors, pirates, merchants and commoners were attempting to materialistically construct a true cosmopolitan society that was not based on abstract claims to universalism (LINEBAUGH, REDIKER 2000). Hidden has remained, for instance, the work of the Irishman Oliver Goldsmith (1730-1774) who in 1762 published a critique of nationalism entitled *Citizen of the World*, featuring characters such as a sailor with a wooden-leg and a ragged woman ballad singer (GOLDSMITH 1762; HANCOCK 1995). Goldsmith was a soldier, a slave, a sailor, a prisoner, a cosmopolitan: a citizen of the world in its purest sense.

A geo-historical analysis of cosmopolitanism must begin by problematizing the cosmopolitan, colonial and dark geographies of modernity (MIGNOLO 2011), given that the causes of our contemporary planetary crisis must be searched in the discovery of the New World (GHOSH 2021). The so-called «Age of Discoveries» and the European circumnavigation of the earth, indeed, has meant the incorporation, within the space of the West, of the Americas first, in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, with the Spanish and Portuguese colonialism, along with the Christian mission of universal redemption and holy wars. Then it was the turn of Asia and Africa to be incorporated, in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, with the British colonization of China and India, the French one in Africa and, generally speaking, the European colonization of the earth surface that characterized modernity. Late nineteenth and twentieth centuries were shaped by the British liberal universalism which constructed a cosmopolitan imagination based on individualism as a universal law of human progress. The «spatial revolution» of modernity coincided with the «territorialization» of social power into the emerging European nation-states. Gradually, new forms of governing and organizing space came to be imposed globally. From the Stoic tradition onwards, the ideal of cosmopolitanism has gone through various «transitions»: with the irruption of Jewish-Christian religion, the *topos* shifted from the *orbi terrarum* of the Roman empire to the *orbi christianus* of the religious-imperial cosmopolitanism of Christianity. This shift from *Pax Romana* to *Pax Christiana*, that lasted until the end of the Middle Age and the Enlightenment, has meant, in some sense, a change of the hegemon but not of the hegemony. The spatiality of the Roman imperial cosmopolitanism, indeed, coincided with that of Christianity (SCUCCIMARRA 2006: 112).

A certain form of cosmopolitanism can be found in each of the three completed «hegemonic transitions» in modern history as conceptualized by the Italian sociologist Giovanni Arrighi (2007). First, during the Genoese-Iberian and Dutch hegemonies of the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth century we

can find the religious-imperial cosmopolitanism of Christianity. The Tordesillas Treaty of 1494, for example, had the aim of shaping the world surface according to the spatial order of the Christian empire. The Treaty of Westphalia of 1648 revolutionized the European system of international relations with the principle of sovereignty, and the nation-state became the only and exclusive paradigm of global politics, transforming the new spatial order. Second, during the British liberal hegemony (*Pax Britannica*), we find the cosmopolitan civilizing mission of European colonialism and imperialism. One of the main objectives of British and European colonialism was to «civilize» other peoples, in the spirit of Enlightenment, and to «assimilate» them and their differences by organizing social life and by stating that the western rule of law was morally superior (IRTI 2006; BUSSANI 2010; MAHMUD 2011). Colonialism, put differently, had a strong civilizational character that was both cosmopolitan and universalist, inasmuch as it was perceived as a responsibility towards the whole mankind, a burden on the «*nations civilisée*». This was an age of modernity where concepts such as «white's man burden» in Great Britain, «*mission civilisatrice*» in France and «*labensraum*» in Nazi Germany were dominating western political thought (HARVEY 1990: 336). It was the age of «orientalism» (SAID 1978, 1993). If the first form of cosmopolitanism was of a religious type, the second one was based on secularism. The third form of cosmopolitanism, that succeeded the colonial civilizing mission, was rooted in the United States cosmopolitan neoliberalism that can be seen as a temporal and spatial expansion of British liberal hegemony and European colonialism. If the colonial civilizing mission of the European nation-states were mostly practiced through a territorial expansionism, the United States cosmopolitanism was practiced through an economic expansionism, new military humanisms (CHOMSKY 1999; SALVATICI 2015) and new imperialisms (HARVEY 2003). Historically, whereas the Europeans were busy colonizing the space outside Europe, in Asia and Africa, the United States was growing up through internal colonization and the land dispossession of the native indigenous peoples (ARRIGHI 2007: 318-319). This new forms of neoliberalism (HARVEY 2005) are based on a cosmopolitan imagination that sees individualism and the ideology of the market as natural and universal laws of civilization, development and human progress. Individualism is not only a political ideology, consolidated by legal and institutional devices: it should also be understood as «the set of material conditions that *constrain* subjects into the guise of individual, discriminating their experience of the world (and above all the experience of individuality itself) according to the existing disparities in the shares of social power they possess.» (MEZZADRA 2020: 40)

Even if there have been non-western ideals of cosmopolitanism in Indian history, and from this point of view it may be interesting to investigate the Sanskrit cosmopolitan culture that emerged at the time of the Stoics, cosmopolitanism is irremediably European in its origins. Nowadays, cosmopolitanism might be thought of as the universal, ecumenic and planetary spatialization of the West on the whole earth surface. In today's global politics, the western rule of law has been spatialized on the whole earth surface. The space of western cosmopolitanism coincides with the politics of the global space, contributing to determine a hierarchy of «stages of civilization», ultimately clashing, as in Samuel Huntington (1996), that foster relations of domination, colonialism and imperialism. Throughout its history, the West has pursued the ecumenic transformation of the whole earth surface. This happened through the various forms of «cosmopolitanism» that can be found in modern western history: the religious-imperial cosmopolitanism of Christianity; the colonial and imperial civilizational cosmopolitanism of the

European states and empires; and the individualist neoliberalism affirming to be a universal and natural law of human progress that could be applicable in every geographical, social and cultural contexts, regardless of their local peculiarities.

This project assumes cosmopolitanism as an «*open collective practical problem*» (BALIBAR 2022). It should not be kept at the outskirts of academic debates as a utopian «ideology» - in the positive sense of the term (EAGLETON 1991) - and as a vague «right of others to enter a foreign society» (as with Kant), attached to the state's sovereignty and its principles of citizenship, nationality, borders and mutually excluding territories (HARVEY 2009). Cosmopolitanism, moreover, has been linked to the moment of capital, the latter seen as a biopolitical social relation (GALLI 2018: 84; MEZZADRA 2020: 295). It is because of the moment of capital (*doux commerce*, the ideal that trade was a factor of civilization and pacification) that Europe lost its provincialism and parochial history to become a universal history and philosophy (CHATTERJEE 1993: 235). The «moment» of capital, allegorically represented by the Shakespeare's Caliban (FEDERICI 2004) has survived all the most important social and democratic revolutions in the West, the English revolution (1640), the American revolution (1765), and the French revolution (1789). Today's cosmopolitanism represents the struggle between community and capital, the latter having a natural tendency to universalism and globalization, whereas the former, apparently, remains entrapped to the contingency of time and the localism of the space. Cosmopolitanism is a victim of modernity and western history, and should not be confused with «internationalism», as it «requires material, specific and local grounding rather than abstract claims to universalism.» (HARDT, MEZZADRA 2024) It is here approached as a laboratory, as it «comprises some of today's most challenging problems of academic analysis and political practice,» (POLLOCK et al. 2002: 1) theory and practice considered as mutually constituting in the socio-spatial dialectic (LEFEBVRE 1976; SOJA 1980, 1989; FOUCAULT 1980, 1986). These being some of the main tenets of critical social theory upon which this project is constructed.

Given the West historical «great transformation» (POLANYI 1974), its «geographies of power» (COLEMAN, AGNEW 2018), namely «internationalism», and historical capitalism (ARRIGHI 2007), how can «cosmopolitanism» become a progressive political philosophy for planetary futures in the current global political conjuncture? Can cosmopolitanism be considered as the universal, ecumenic and planetary spatialization of the West? In short, what is the difference between thinking spatially about cosmopolitanism? The research is meant to be a geo-historical analysis of cosmopolitanism from a postcolonial perspective aiming at constructing critical geographies of cosmopolitanism. The geographical perspective will enable me to think about the world as the seat of *difference* rather than of *unity*. Inspired by Balibar's approach (2022), I attempt to problematize cosmopolitanism, and to consider it as a «system of representation» (HARVEY 1990), rather than as a simple political philosophy based on philosophical, yet not politically neutral, notions of belonging, identity, democracy, human rights, freedom, progress, rationality and civilization. Only those who are equal can live as citizens of world as equals. In conducting the research, I critically engage with cosmopolitanism as a geopolitical representation, a political-theoretical concept of «earth writing» and an example of «geo-power» (TOAL 1996) that while spatializing politics, from the western single perspective, with its meanings, never disinterested, onto the whole world surface, removes difference from politics. The postcolonial approach (MEZZADRA 2008; YOUNG 2001; JAZEEL 2019) means that I adopt an «ontological diversity» in the

space-times of here and now (JAZEEL 2011: 78-79), and that I engage in non-assimilatory terms with difference, and in particular with the different forms of social life in world history, that are seen «in terms of a relationality of heterogeneous spatial simultaneity and not homogeneous temporal linearity.» (METHA 1999: 108).

3. Expected results

The expected result of this research project is a comprehensive study, analysis and investigation into the intersections between space and cosmopolitanism (WARF 2021), space and politics (GALLI 2001; MINCA, BIALASIEWICZ 2004); the interplay between history and geography with political philosophy. The primary objective is to develop critical geographies of cosmopolitanism, that means studies inspired by the concept of «*critical cosmopolitanism*» (MIGNOLO 2002: 159), and to problematize the geographical imaginations it has implied throughout its history compared to its actual, material practices. The proposal delve into the materialistic transformations of cosmopolitanism by taking into account the life experiences of all those subjects who, across social class, race, and gender, have resisted the regimes of domination, subjugation and exploitation inherent in the history of colonial capitalism.

Cumulatively, the objective is to rethink about cosmopolitanism from a postcolonial perspective through a critique of the present (MEZZADRA 2020) and of the spaces of capital (HARVEY 2001), to construct critical mappings of cosmopolitanism and to discuss, in the light of history, the practical and theoretical issues raised by these broad considerations above conveyed, with the aim to deduce from them some conclusions that may have a certain practical value for academic analysis and political agency. The guiding principle is encapsulated in the notion that «our history is the future» (ESTES 2019), inasmuch as, to envision planetary futures, cosmopolitanism's foremost task is to try to build an alternative to our current capitalist society.

4. Articulation of the proposal and implementation times

The research activities can provisionally be structured as follows: the *first* year will focus on analysing, reviewing and studying the relevant literature, archival materials, and bibliographical sources. I will critically engage with the main theoretical conceptualizations and practices of cosmopolitanism from a geographical and postcolonial perspective. I will try to attend conferences and seminars that deal with my research topics and that could be interesting for my research, in Italy and abroad, followed by the drafting of papers, articles and essays to be subjected to a peer review process for scientific publication, along with the academic activities foreseen by the doctoral program. During the *second* year, the research activities planned will be continued and integrated with the new findings, ideas and opportunities. For the second year, a research and study period abroad, to deepen and widen my understandings, and to have a facilitated access to archival materials, books and volumes that are difficult to find in Italy is expected. From this perspective I am in touch with an American geographer of the University of Kansas, Barney Warf, who has an ongoing interest in cosmopolitanism. The first drafting of my thesis index is expected to be completed in the second half of this year. The *third* year will be dedicated to finalizing the doctoral dissertation, once verified the fruitfulness, solidity and originality of my arguments.

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