



Per Wirtén

Free the nation – cosmopolitanism now!

"Cosmopolite" was once a pejorative code word used to denounce Jews, anarchists, pacifists and others who refused to accept the call for fixed borders coming from the nation states. Now, in another historic turning-point, cosmopolitanism makes a comeback. Per Wirtén discusses what it means to be cosmopolitan both today and in historical terms. Religion has successfully been separated from the state, he argues. The same should happen to the nation.

At the same time as Serbian grenades pounded the city of Vukovar in the north-eastern part of Croatia – a chilling premonition of the systematic cruelty that characterized the Yugoslavian wars later on – I read *The Bridge Over the River Drina*, written in the 1950s by Ivo Andric. I still vividly remember one of the characters from the novel chronicling life in the small town of Visegrad from the 16th century to World War I; the Jewish hotel hostess Lotte, a vigorous but deeply unhappy woman. During the last few years the luminosity of that memory has only grown stronger, and every time I now come across the familiar names of Jean-Marie Le Pen, Pia Kjærsgaard, Jörg Haider – or witness how Western governments, one after another, call for massive fortifications in order to close off Europe from the rest of the world – Lotte materializes as a symbol of a different order.

Originally from Poland, she had come by foot to Visegrad where she established *Hotel zur Brücke*, the tallest building that the insignificant town boasted. By that time, the Turkish Empire had lost its hegemonic position and Bosnia was a province of the double-monarchy of Austria-Hungary. The original population of Muslims, orthodox Christians and Jews blended with immigrants from other parts of Europe and the interaction resulted in revitalization.

At night Lotte locked herself in her small office to which nobody else had access. There, at a desk cluttered with letters, documents, press cuttings from Austrian papers and lottery lists from every corner of Europe, she led her other and perhaps fuller life. From that cramped space she corresponded with acquaintances all over Eastern Europe, financed university studies for young relatives in Galizia, gave marriage guidance, commented on current topics buzzing in the big cities, bought and sold stocks at the Vienna stock market or studied financial news from distant metropolitan centres. Being profoundly grounded in the multi-ethnic everyday life of Visegrad, Lotte was also part of a borderless Jewish network that connected people separated by vast distances. In essence, home was a multitude of places. Visegrad was her hometown, but her true mother country was the set of connections that emerged every time she withdrew to her office. Thus, terms such as home, identity and belonging came with overlapping meanings to Lotte as she led a cosmopolitan life in an

inconsequential rural town.

In the 18th century Voltaire and other Enlightenment philosophers formulated the basic tenets of a cosmopolitan politics. To them, the homeland simply meant the republic: a political community where law, freedom and sovereignty replaced the repression enforced by a corrupt monarchy and as such it was not signified by a certain culture, language or ethnicity. Voltaire's state was the republic, *not* the nation state.

But it was the 1785 classic *The eternal peace* by Immanuel Kant that was to become the cosmopolitan text *par excellence*. If Voltaire took interest in the inner conditions of the republic, Kant focused on the relations *between* republics and an international legal system. To some extent, his ideas were realized through the United Nations, the declaration of human rights, and different international conventions. Voltaire's republic on the other hand was pulverized by nationalism. In time, *cosmopolitans* became a derogatory synonym for Jews, communists, anarchists, pacifists and anybody else who refused to accept demands for ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious homogeneity made in the name of the nation state. The cold war not only effectively divided the world, but also saw to it that cosmopolitan principles were relegated to the level of private daydreaming. Following the downfall of the Berlin Wall however, these perspectives have returned to the international debate where they, as tools helping us to answer the question of what a country or a state ought to be and how quality of life in a borderless world should look like, shine a new, but strikingly familiar light on the international (dis)order.

Then, a few years back, when I read a very different book, *New and old wars*, by the British peace – and conflict researcher Mary Kaldor I suddenly remembered Lotte and her desk. Kaldor's main point is that the war in Bosnia pitted two different world–views against each other: the nationalist, strictly ethnical and excluding view faced off against the cosmopolitan idea of pluralism and inclusion. Her most important discovery however was that the cosmopolitans were not always the ones you perhaps expected them to be.

As it turned out, those who defended cosmopolitan ideas often lived in small towns and villages where they hid refugees, saving them from ethnic cleansing and paving the way for continued co–existence. Many of them had never gone to university or even once left the place where they were born. In contrast, many of the most militant Croatian and Serbian nationalists had in many ways lead what we tend to think of as a cosmopolitan life: educated at foreign universities they felt at home in all of the major airports around the world and could converse in a relaxed manner with the global political and financial elite. Nonetheless, they represented ethno–fascist politics. Thus Kaldor very effectively disproved a die–hard and fundamentally false presupposition: that it is always the educated elite that represents the cosmopolitan tradition and uneducated farmers who promote a nationalistic and intolerant agenda.

Because it so clearly demonstrated the horrific consequences of rampant nationalism and ethnification, the war in Yugoslavia proved a major eye–opener for most Europeans. Once again, the cosmopolitan tradition seemed like a possible alternative. In theory, the emergence of a racist, right–wing European nationalism hostile to Muslims, Jews, or anyone dark–skinned and against open borders and European integration may in fact create a similar effect and lead to a situation where nationalism appears less and less as a viable alternative.

Cosmopolitanism offers a standpoint that ties together several parallel discussions: the impact of multiculturalism and globalisation; of local and global, of the self and the others. But the true strength of the return of the cosmopolitan comes from the fact that it no longer is created by theory alone, but springs from actual social conditions, from lived experiences – very much in the vein of how Lotte conducted her life at the *Hotel zur Brücke*. As the four editors of the recently published anthology *Cosmopolitanisms* write in their foreword, the cosmopolitan emerges from the "below" of social hierarchies:

Cosmopolitans today are often the victims of modernity, failed by capitalism's upward mobility, and bereft of those comforts and customs of national belonging. Refugees, peoples of the Diaspora, and migrants and exiles represent the spirit of the cosmopolitical community.

Together with Richard Falk and Mary Kaldor, both specialists in international law, the political scientists David Held and Daniele Archibugi have continually during the 1990s sought to elaborate a cosmopolitan reply to the political challenges of globalisation. While democracy has become the norm for domestic political conditions post-1989, Held and Archibugi argue that multilateral relations are still largely hidden behind a camouflage of diplomacy and that international relations have been much less affected by democratic movements. In fact, the UN, the International Monetary Fund, EU and other institutions go about their business as if nothing had happened. Public access to information is limited and citizens cannot claim accountability from those in power.

Held and Archibugi are concerned that authoritarian forms of governance will defeat democratic ones in a densely globalised world. To counter such tendencies, the international community has to become democratic enough to be able to force totalitarian regimes towards increased openness and democracy. Without a cosmopolitan democracy, local involvement will simply not survive. "It takes as its aim the creation of a democratic community which both involves and cut across democratic states," they write.

Obviously, conventions and international treaties that successively have limited the sovereignty of the nation state are an inspiration to Held and Archibugi, who still feel that these processes have to be opened up even further and made even more egalitarian. Such an ambition in fact challenges one basic notion: that democracy only works within the boundaries of the nation state and in an environment characterized by cultural similarity.

And this is precisely the terrain where the core conflict between the current system of nation states and the tradition of the cosmopolitan idea is played out.

For the cosmopolitans, politics, democracy, and public openness – the Greek *Agora* – represents a meeting place where a collective identity for a country and solidarity between its citizens can be created. Cultural likeness and national community are not prerequisites for democracy. On the contrary, a democracy can consist of many nations, religions and cultures. Variety and difference are assets, not impediments, in the republican tradition of Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas.

Held and Archibugi have tried to make their concept of an international cosmopolitan democracy more specific, primarily suggesting that the UN should be reformed. Since it already offers a potential of a global political

agora, it may be strengthened as a forum for international discussions and democratic decisions. Daniele Archibugi recommends that the organization should establish a second chamber, a general assembly of the people that is directly elected, and that the Security Council be reformed so that the veto-right is abolished or made harder to use. He advocates a more powerful international court for human rights allowing individual claims and of course a War Crime Court (currently embodied in the International Criminal Court).

Such a strategy obviously undercuts national sovereignty and further calls into question the system of sovereign nation states, which was established as a norm after the Westphalian peace in 1648. It is worth repeating that the aim of cosmopolitanism is to privilege democracy and its politics rather than the sovereignty of the nation state.

Held is sometimes criticized for the way in which his ideas of cosmopolitan and global democracy in practice might lead to a highly centralized world-government executing a autocratic form of power. This is an important objection and one even Immanuel Kant acknowledged when he wrote *The eternal peace*. But Held is careful to point out that the autonomy of each individual country will not disappear, but represents instead, together with strong regional and democratic institutions such as the EU, the very backbone of the system. As in the tradition of federalism, power must however by default come from below and be delegated upwards. Such a model can be seen as a fabric made up of democratic power-relations on different levels and in different places that strives to encapsulate the concerns of the global – a cosmopolite. Having said that, one must continue to regard attempts to create grandiose and all-encompassing systems with a healthy dose of scepticism, and Held and Archibugi's version is no exception in this respect.

The question is how much Held's optimism is worth in a world that since September 11th 2001 is on its way to be restructured according to the American "War against terrorism." In this scenario the UN and other global institutions and legal principalities have come to play a peripheral rather than spotlighted role, and this turn of events is an even more urgent reason why we must insist on a different and more democratic international order.

On a more everyday basis, national sovereignty is also challenged by migration patterns that tend to create a phenomenon different scientist refer to as a trans-national network.

In the early 1990s, the sociologist Peggy Levitt documented the lives of citizens in the Dominican Republic village of Miraflores, both those who remained there as well as those who had left for the US and now inhabited a part of Boston known as Jamaica Plains. The bond between these two places was and is strong – about 2 out of 3 citizens in Miraflores have relatives in Jamaica Plains – and contacts between them take place not only on a daily basis but on all levels of society: people, money and ways of living flow back and forth. In her book *Transnational Villagers*, Levitt subsequently refers to the phenomenon as a transnational village.

Migration influence single villages as well as the entire nation of the Dominican Republic. Almost 10 per cent of the Dominican population now lives in the US and the financial transactions they make are equivalent to about half of the national budget. In other words, the Dominican Republic depends heavily on its emigrants and therefore the country has started to institutionalise the bonds between the "Diaspora" and the homeland. Political parties now

designate seats in their executive committees for American Dominicans and have local organizations in Boston and New York where they invest substantial amounts of money in their campaigns. In 1996, the country allowed double citizenship and the following year the election-laws were changed so that Dominicans who had lost their citizenship in order to procure an American one, were given the right both to vote and to run for office. The latter move represents a revolutionary change in how a nation state operates and views itself. The borders of the Dominican Republic – in terms of land areas and citizenship – have quite simply become blurred and porous. There are several representatives from the US in the congress of the Dominican Republic and talks are underway to ensure that New York is made a formal election-district within the country's political geography.

Levitt describes how people and state alike are transformed by migration, how they both adapt to and create a system that has the potential for an open and cosmopolitan politics, but that paradoxically enough may lead to just the opposite; a stronger ethnification of the nation state. Political values determine which outcome that will prevail, but it is quite possible that the Dominican Republic is on its way to becoming a "transnational country".

Similar, but not as obvious processes are at play in Western Europe. You can remain a Turkish citizen while having the benefit of almost all civil rights in Sweden, the country you live and work in but might not want to become a citizen of. Previously taken for granted, the relationship between the nation state and citizenship is dissolving by the day. Citizens of the EU have the right to vote locally no matter where their passport is issued, something that increases the potential for Europe as a cosmopolitan continent but that in and of itself cannot guarantee the automatic arrival of such a framework. That corollary can only come from a conscious political choice between different values and outlooks.

All these issues are highlighted in the fight over the multicultural. The concept of the nation state relies on the idea of a common origin and shared cultural values, which we can trace back to European racial philosophies developed during the 17th and 18th century. As a result, migrants have had to accept subordination because they are represented as threats to national harmony and balance by their very "differentness". A quote by the conservative Danish politician Birte Rønn Hornbech illustrates this propensity:

Denmark is a country that is built around one people [...] Danish Christianity, history, culture, view on democracy and our thoughts about freedom must continue to be the foundation that Denmark rests on. [...] We don't want a Denmark where the Danish become a temporary ethnic minority and where our freedom is pulled away.

In juxtaposition to this idea we find a cosmopolitan multicultural perspective embracing variety and continuous movement across all fixed ethnical, cultural, and religious boundaries tied to identity. The consequence of such a position is that the tie between nation-and-state must be severed. Sweden cannot continue to view itself as the state for the Swedish nation, but a state and a homeland that consists of many nationalities. Once again we return to the nucleus of the problem where the terms of nation, ethnicity, identity and culture must be contended with. Indeed, one of the purposes of the cosmopolitan view is to recast these concepts, to infuse them with new meaning and replace the destructive energy that has caused so many wars and

encroachments. Nation and ethnicity have to be divorced from politics and state in the same way that religion has been separated from them. In practice the cosmopolitan view means that racist movements and parties are to be seen as integrated, yet unacceptable expressions of European tradition of thought.

A society of anti-racism and multi-culture cannot rest on the same basic foundation as nationalism. The governments of Western Europe have chosen a path of least resistance to defend themselves against the onslaught of right wing nationalism: stronger borders, tougher police supervision as well as increased emphasis on national and cultural homogeneity. The cosmopolitan tradition has emphasised the connections between race-philosophy, nationalism and the nation – state making up this negative spiral for decades. Bearing this in mind, Europe has to regard the EU and immigration as a chance to liberate itself from the heritage of nationalism and from now on let the politics of the public sphere take the place of nation, race and ethnicity.

As I have already hinted at, a number of important objections can be raised against the cosmopolitan. Not only can we discern the contours of a global super-state, we must also contend with the nationalist objection that the prerequisite for democracy is a homogenous culture and rethink the classical question of how extensive we really want a democracy to become. Perhaps only a limited area can be covered – a city, a country or a region – in order not to result in fragmentation and emptiness.

We must carefully consider the cosmopolitan alliance with a rootless and privileged social elite. The anarchist aristocracy of yesterday is today's cadre of experts drifting between board meetings and consultant commissions – people largely without social ties to places or other people. What follows in their wake are tendencies of global cultural homogenisation and commercialisation in the name of the major multinational corporations, something that in the long run threatens to make local networks and the conditions for political agency extinct.

One major conflict remains unsolved by this new interest in the cosmopolitan, and that is the one between the universal and the particular. In the anthology *Cosmopolitics* (ed: Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins) a number of philosophers, anthropologists and cultural sociologists confront this classical dilemma.

Immanuel Kant and the early cosmopolitans took the existence of a number of moral rules that were valid everywhere and in all conditions for granted. But the notion of the universal as formulated by the European centre has always been criticized. Are there any eternal values at all? Or are they actually perspectives that constantly change, develop and become reformulated by critical scrutiny and experience? Is not therefore a certain amount of relativism necessary for a view of democracy where dialogue and civil society is put centre stage? Many feminists and post-colonial thinkers have demonstrated how universalism tends to hide an unjust order and an inequitable exercise of power. They claim the universal world is always pre-fabricated from a centre of power and then forced on the peripheries; a kind of "I rational, You Jane"

Although the anthology presents different solutions to this conflict, many have one thing in common: based in a critique of universalism they still acknowledge that forms of global rules and values have to be created. Interestingly enough, these are now formulated from a different perspective than that of the privileged; from the Dominican migrant, the Kurdish refugee,

the stateless Palestinian, the indigenous propertyless of Chiapas. The anthropologist James Clifford formulates it as "cosmopolitanism viewed without universalist nostalgia" and suggests, in an attempt to avoid the trap of regimentation and centralization, an idea of many incongruous cosmopolitanisms.

The liberal philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah – born in Ghana but working in US – tells us in one of the more interesting contributions in the volume about how he has inherited his cosmopolitan outlook from his father, a man he describes as a "rooted cosmopolitan." To Appiah, this stance of being a patriotic citizen in multi-ethnic Ghana, but also a cosmopolitan patriot resulted from the colonial influence, his father's London education, and from the local Asante-culture.

Deeply vested in a place and a culture his father nonetheless considered roots without value if they were not portable. When he died, his children found a letter of his, attempting to formulate and pass on his world-view to them. "Remember that you are citizens of the world" he wrote, and continued his letter by telling them that they had the right to live wherever they wanted, but that they also had an obligation to do their best to leave each place they inhabited "better than we found it".

A cosmopolitan patriot must therefore feel a moral and political responsibility that extends beyond the own nation or the own homeland, Appiah writes. Not only is it a feeling of responsibility for all of mankind, but it also includes the understanding that there are different local forms of human life were "we need not treat people from other cultures in a civilized manner *in spite of* our differences, but we can meet them in a human and civilized way *through* our differences."

The years between the downfall of the wall in 1989 and the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington DC in 2001 summoned cosmopolitanism as a way of life and as a perspective on society, but also as an interpretation of contemporary realities and the border-crossing personal destinies we are increasingly used to encounter. The American war against terrorism now threatens to end cosmopolitanism as a realistic and possible way for society: walls are rebuilt and even fortified, nationality is brought to the fore and discourses abound on how defined and homogenous cultural spheres are in conflict with each other. But to millions of people, cosmopolitanism is an experience that they live every day, it forms the tools by which important parts of daily life are managed and undermines the order of the world that the war against terrorism tries to force upon us. The cosmopolitans no longer offer us Utopia, but a quite realistic counter-strategy to the repressive picture of the world that has been privileged for so long.

Finally, what happened to Lotte in Visegrad?

World War I put a brutal end to her flourishing hotel-business. Fleeing with her family, she suffered a nervous breakdown and retired into wordless and apathetic darkness. Several years before the war, her cosmopolitan activity in the secret office on the top floor of the hotel had begun to disintegrate. The world became increasingly claustrophobic, until the 1930s, World War II and the iron-curtain not only destroyed the remains of her network but turned her entire way of life into distant memories.

She ended her days as a refugee in Sarajevo, a city that a few years after I finished Andric's novel was like a microcosmos of Lotte's world – an attempt

against all odds to defend the idea of a more cosmopolitan Europe and revolt against the nationalistic strive for ethnic homogeneity and definite borders.

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