

Cosmopolitics: An Ongoing Question

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1. An Ongoing Question

The meaning of the simple phrase “cosmopolitics” seems almost self-evident: Cosmopolitics refers to the politics of the cosmos. But this definition begs further investigation—for what kind of “cosmos” has a “politics”? These two terms, distinct in everyday language, need to be brought together. But how? Cosmos in this context designates the multitude of beings—human and nonhuman, living and nonliving—that together construct reality and form a collective society—a society that has always included the nonhuman despite frequent attempts to see things otherwise. Cosmos becomes attached to politics by means of the many associations continually forged and broken between humans and nonhumans. The cosmos in this sense is itself a historical being not juxtaposed to the history of human beings.

If the political cosmos means anything it means the ecology of everything, human and nonhuman. In this sense cosmopolitics emerges as an integrative practice for navigating today’s fractured landscape of knowledge (Stengers, 2010, p. vii). For Isabelle Stengers this fracture refers to the fissure between facts and values, subjects and objects, nature and society, time and history, or world and representation. This fissure—a bifurcation of nature if there ever was one—places us in a bind because the task of political ecology demands that we think facts and values together; however, the bifurcation leaves us unable to bridge the gap that would allow us to see facts and values as two sides of the same integral ontology. It is as though the domains of aesthetics, values, and subjects belong to a different universe from facts, objects, and data, forever irreconcilable.

In the bifurcated view, subjects and objects form two separate spheres of reality whilst at the same time colliding everywhere. Knowledge is shaped so as to create a mirror image of an external and unified world. Language, society, and history fall on one side of the line, while the world, as it exists in itself, falls on the other. Cosmopolitics suggests a unique practice of relating to these bifurcations: acknowledging our participation in multiple, irreducible worlds—not just at the level of knowledge and concepts (epistemological pluralism) but at the level of being itself (ontological pluralism). Such pluralism indicates the pervasive influence of Whitehead (1978) on cosmopolitics, as it echoes his “ontological principle”—that is, the *reason* for anything is always one or more actual entities. Thus instead of spatializing reality by positing two separate containers—one called nature and one called society—cosmopolitics suggests that there are as many modes of reality as there are entities. The task is to trace the multiplicity of associations between entities as they participate in a common, ecological collective—where nonhumans also have a

voice in society—rather than to deliberate between the vacuous abstractions of nature and culture.

By suggesting an ontological pluralism, cosmopolitics renders an account without a giant gap between two separate spheres (Nature and Society), and instead navigates a terrain filled with innumerable tiny gaps and crossings between beings. Without reifying the knowledge-world gap, cosmopolitics nevertheless sees the gap between knowledge and being as indicative of a problem of relations in general. In Latour's (1999) words, "the immense abyss separating words and things can be found everywhere," (p. 51). The shift from one enormous gap to countless tiny ones is significant: By not having to cross a huge gap between worlds cosmopolitics returns us to the wild diversity of things themselves without appeal to subject-object, nature-culture dichotomies. Here "the fragile gulf of reference" Latour (2004, p. 85) warns puts so much pressure on language to represent an entire world does not disappear entirely, but becomes only one of many links that mobilizes the collective in certain ways. Thus, rather than thinking of knowledge exclusively as a tool for epistemic inquiry, cosmopolitics describes the *ontology of knowledge* by approaching knowledge as one of the many links that creates associations between beings, instead of as a unique mode responsible for representing all of them.

In this sense, cosmopolitics overcomes what Whitehead (1920) calls "the bifurcation of nature," which separates the material world from the world of knowledge and ideas (p. 30). Once the bifurcation of nature has been abandoned, the number of ontologically real worlds multiply. The multiplicity of real worlds implied by cosmopolitics suggests that if we can permit the term "multiculturalism," we must also submit to the term "multinaturalism"—that is, if we are to continue using the old language at all (Latour, 2004). The turn to multinaturalism reframes the possibilities of knowledge, and here cosmopolitics suggests something radical, but perhaps completely sensible: There is not a single world revealed through a multiplicity of perspectives; instead, there are a multiplicity of worlds each entwined with one another, and made present by different sets of practices. Thus instead of trying to speak correctly of a single world as it is apart from all knowledges, practices, or instruments, cosmopolitics takes the position of a *collective history* wherein social history and cosmic history are deeply entangled in multispecies ecologies that include built environments, technologies, and knowledges.

2. The Ecology of Time

Cosmopolitics thus tries to link the human and nonhuman in two ways: Temporally, by refusing a sharp distinction between history and natural ontology, and contiguously, by refusing ontological distinctions between human subjects or artifacts from nonhuman ones to begin with. The temporal unfolding of cosmopolitics recurs through "ecological singularities" (Stengers, 2010, p. 115). These singularities—events in the broadest sense—defy strict boundaries between causes and effects, or conditions and events, creating multiple "universes of value" (to use the term Stengers borrows from Felix Guattari). In one sense there are no causes or conditions acting from the outside because there is no unitary, transcendental mold which forms the structure of possibility for all the creatures living on the "inside" of its conditions. Rather, conditions are themselves immanent values—ingredients acting from *within* a specific event—that acquaint us with a logic

of qualitative multiplicity (p. 194). By acknowledging an ontologically real, qualitative multiplicity, cosmopolitics foregrounds the “modes of presence” (p. 169) brought into relation by different practices, practitioners, and the nonhuman artifacts they assemble.

For cosmopolitics, then, there is no sovereign power under which all modes of existence can be organized, and there is no meta-language through which one can master the diversity of all discursive or material practices. All meta-languages are terms that unite different entities from the *inside* at a cost; and, like conditions, they are immanent to events, rather than external to them. Physics, for example, while often viewed as a sovereign system of knowledge against which all others must be tested, is itself at risk of reduction to its own anemic system of valuation. For Stengers (2010) physics has itself been reduced to a certain kind of physics, “the triumph of the physics of laws over the physics of phenomena” (p. 175). The relationship between laws and phenomena is an important one for cosmopolitics. Rather than saying that there are no physical laws—an untenable position—Stengers gives a more complex picture of the entanglement of laws and phenomena. Cosmopolitics invites us to think with an ecological and historical conception of physics that includes the physics of phenomena and the physics of laws, where the physics of laws are themselves immanent to the ecological circumstances from within which phenomena interact.

On the topic of the relation between laws and phenomena, Stengers again draws from Whitehead. For Whitehead (1968), laws are more accurately described as habits—behavioral characteristics of interacting phenomena emerging from a particular stage of their development (p. 154). To quote Whitehead (1991): “It must be remembered that just as the relations modify the natures of the relata, so the relata modify the nature of the relation” (p. 157). For Stengers and Whitehead the relationship between laws and phenomena is complex: laws are not external or unified containers acting from outside, below, or beyond the level of phenomena; rather, they are powers that emerge from *within* the qualities and interactions of phenomena themselves. Thus instead of trying to anoint an absolute sovereign from which a feudal hierarchy of knowledge can be built, cosmopolitics suggests a different, more democratic, way forward: Cosmopolitics approaches each territory of entities as populated by distinct possibilities, qualities, and obligations. Each territory produces its own “habits” or “customs” that take the shape of immanent laws influencing the behavior of individuals. To put it in Whitehead’s (1978) words, “We find ourselves in a buzzing world, amid a democracy of fellow creatures” (p. 50).

But how do we approach these distinct territories in a way that integrates their respective values without assimilating them, including them without enclosing them? Cosmopolitics offers us a series of practices and concepts to help orient us towards this diversity.

3. Ecology of Practices

A key concept addressing the dynamic between constraints and obligations is the ecology of practices. “Ecology” in this context refers to the study of the complex and uncertain interactions between more than just organisms and environments but, more generally, between any beings, and where interactions are never merely material but always involve value and the production of meaning. Thus ecology is, to quote

Stengers (2010), “the science of multiplicities, disparate causalities, and unintentional creation of meaning” (p. 34). By linking ecology to causality itself, cosmopolitics takes a much broader, metaphysical approach to ecological relations than is considered in the regular, scientific use of the term. The cosmos from this view is itself an ecology of interacting beings, ideas, practices, and technologies. “Practices” here refer to ways of cultivating new relations between human and nonhuman members of a community, as opposed to methods for representing or accessing an external, unified world. Taken together these terms suggest a dual relationship to the ontology of values: Certain practices bring into existence certain values, and certain values maintain the existence of certain kinds of practice. This is not unlike what Whitehead (1979) calls the emergence of a “society” from a “nexus”; in order for a set of values to stabilize within the greater ecology of being it needs to happen more than once—it needs repetition, and this often means it needs a unique infrastructure, a whole social apparatus, to keep going.

Knowledge, from this view, is not what is achieved when researchers are able to detach from the worlds they study like disinterested observers; rather, knowledge is a powerful link between researchers and the subjects of research. Knowledge attaches and entangles rather than clarifies and separates; it multiplies relations between beings, and foregrounds the way concepts and ideas capture researchers just as much as it is researchers who produce concepts and ideas. Another way to say this is that it is as much the physicist who is captured and transformed by her neutrino, as it is the neutrino who is captured and transformed by its encounter with the physicist. Once the physicist becomes aware of the entity she has called “neutrino” she must add this being to her list of entities that shape and define the scope and capacities of her practice as a scientist. The “cosmos” of “cosmopolitics” has entered and disturbed the “politics” that was once considered a solely human affair.

While the ecology of practices points to the entangled, coinvention of identities, it does not suggest a consensus of conflicting parts brought into an ideal peace or overarching harmony—but this lack of consensus between modes of value does not foreclose the possibility of mutually enhancing relationships. For Stengers “symbiotic agreements” describe the events in which different modes of existence render one another stable (Stengers, 2010, p. 35). When a practice maintains a certain set of values that in turn stabilize the practice, a symbiotic agreement has formed. Symbiotic agreements bear upon ethical practices of knowledge and decision-making, calling for responsibility—a “sharing of suffering” (Haraway, 2008, p. 72)—wherein our practices participate in the struggles and challenges of whatever modes of existence we are engaging.

Politics, long thought to be a specifically human affair, must now play out globally in ecological settings, abjuring any homogenization of ecological differences and instead facilitating the participation of the varied and diverse beings affected by any decision.

4. Multiple Species, Technologies, and Ideas

While so far we have described cosmopolitics primarily in terms of humans, their technologies, and knowledge-making practices, the concept also applies to multiple species. A central component of multispecies cosmopolitics is the growing

field of cognitive ethology—the study of animal minds (Bekoff, 2012)—a field cosmopolitics draws from and complexifies in unique ways.

While earlier research questioned even the existence of animal minds, more recent approaches accept that nonhumans possess a broad range of cognitive abilities including thoughts, feelings, and emotions (Proctor, 2012), experiences of joy, pleasure, pain, and fear, (Proctor, Carder, & Cornish, 2013), and more complex functions such as memory, a sense of the future, and personal preferences (Jones, 2012). A milestone in the study and acceptance of the reality of animal sentience is The Cambridge Declaration of Consciousness (“CDC”). By arguing that nonhumans think and feel—but not necessarily in a way similar to how humans or other mammals do—the CDC goes a long to combatting the anthropocentrism that has hampered research into the lived experience of animals (Proctor, 2012), and this makes the declaration a key ally to cosmopolitics. The CDC is joined by other researchers including Lynn Margulis (1997) who take the idea of nonhuman minds even further. Margulis writes: “I can point to conscious, actively communicating . . . microscopic life . . . The processes of perception, awareness, speculation, and the like evolved in the microcosm: The subvisible world of our bacterial ancestors” (p. 114). If we take seriously the insights of cognitive ethology, we find a new view of the ecosystem as a whole that any practice of cosmopolitics must take seriously: All organisms from bacteria to mammals, to divergent extents and degrees, possess some level of mind or sentience. Human ecologist Alf Hornborg (2001) reflects on this vision:

Each organism and species exists by virtue of its capacity to perceive and interpret the world around it. An ecosystem is not a machine, where the various components mindlessly fulfill their functions as a reflection of the external mind of the engineer. Ecosystems are incredibly complex articulations of innumerable, sentient subjects, engaging each other through the lenses of their own subjective worlds. (p. 125)

Multispecies cosmopolitics does not just recognize the multiple universes of value activated by different human practices, but also recognizes those universes of value that belong to the entangled worlds of nonhuman species.

While the insights of cognitive ethology drawn at multiple scales from the very small to the very large make important contributions to cosmopolitics they nevertheless make an omission: In these approaches to ethology, there is often no accounting for the role played by inorganic and technological actors in the constitution of human and more than human ecologies. As an influential factor in the constitution of Earth’s ecologies, technology must be factored into the coevolution of human and nonhuman species. Here Donna Haraway’s (2008) work on cosmopolitics and companion species is particularly insightful. Drawing attention to the increasing role played by technology in the configuration of the Earth, Haraway suggests that “technological assemblages” constitute their own kind of “species.”

What cosmopolitics tries to describe is that ecologies are irreducibly complex societies of value-emitting organisms, technologies, and abiotic beings that are also centers of valuation. Technologies, no less than organic species, generate their own systems of values, constraints, and obligations that need tending to. Technologies,

not unlike living beings, are never value-neutral, tools empty of their own content or characteristics. Technologies of all kinds—no matter what their use—are dynamic and lively agencies, bringing forth a series of unpredictable constraints, requirements, and possibilities that cannot be theorized in terms of their human usefulness alone. Here our comprehension of and responses to ecological phenomena are not determined from on high by detached observers, but emerge in the act of companionship with as many species as possible—participating in the material-semiotic networks of all the beings involved in the situation, human and nonhuman, corporeal and incorporeal, natural and artificial, familiar and uncanny.

Finally, cosmopolitics also honors the unique role played the ecology of ideas and knowledge. Stengers (2013) in particular juxtaposes the “knowledge ecology” to the “knowledge economy” to foreground the power knowledges—including concepts and fictions—have in shaping humans and human practices, as well as the effects these practices have on nonhuman communities. The idea expressed here is that, much like the ecology of practices refers to the way in which different activities fold back to encourage certain identities, thoughts, ideas, and knowledges are also “captured” by one another, exerting influence on each other and upon the psyches that deploy them. The Earth is wrapped in a writhing ecology of ideas and concepts; we are captured by ideas just as we capture them. The central claim is that ideas, to quote Haraway (2008), are “themselves technologies for pursuing inquiries. It’s not just that ideas are embedded in practices; they *are* technical practices of situated kinds” (p. 282).

How far can the idea of cosmopolitics take us? It can take us toward an integration of facts and values, nature and culture, nonhumans and humans. It can take us toward participatory engagements with the frictions and struggles necessary to the composition of a shared world. It can take us toward an other-globalization oriented toward mutually enhancing relations between all of Earth’s ecological singularities. Cosmopolitics is thus about recognizing the entanglement of human and nonhuman practices and ethologies, the values and requirements wrought by technology, and the influential agency of the ecology of knowledge and ideas.

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