coming up in Dædalus:

on judicial independence

on the humanities now

Dædalus Summer 2008:
on cosmopolitanism
Darrin M. McMahon Strangers & strange lands 5
Margaret C. Jacob The cosmopolitan as a lived category 18
Pheng Cheah World literature as world-making activity 26
Rogers M. Smith Paths to a more cosmopolitan human condition 39
A. A. Long The concept in Greek & Roman thought 50
Helena Rosenblatt The case of Rousseau 59
Seyla Benhabib Cosmopolitanism, justice & institutions 68
Samuel Scheffler Toward a globally sensitive patriotism 78
Craig Calhoun Cosmopolitanism in the modern social imaginary 105
Martha C. Nussbaum The legitimacy of human rights 94
Seyla Benhabib Cosmopolitanism in the modern social imaginary 105

annals
on the humanities now

poetry
Robert Pinsky Paradise 125
Alix Ohlin The Teacher 126

fiction
Elizabeth Benedict Murder one: Mad Dog Taborsky & me 115

notes
Barbara J. Finlayson-Pitts on man, nature & air pollution 135
William C. Kirby on Chinese, European & American universities 139
Charles S. Stanish on museums in a postmodern world 147
Jean Delumeau begins his classic study of fear in early-modern Europe with an account, drawn from the travel journals of Montaigne, of entering the great walls of the free imperial city of Augsburg, Germany, by night. Four massive gates, reinforced iron barriers and doors, sealed passageways, a drawbridge, and another bridge traversing a moat together offered a daunting prospect to outsiders while protecting the sixty thousand inhabitants of this prosperous Renaissance city from whatever might disturb their sleep. The city-dwellers had plenty to fear in 1580, the year of Montaigne’s arrival. If the Catholic and Protestant soldiers who had ravaged central Europe for decades had temporarily laid down their pikes – agreeing to do so in the Peace of Augsburg (1555), brokered in the city itself – Ottoman armies still loomed to the east. To the west, in Montaigne’s native France, Christians continued their internecine religious wars without reprieve. Satan, too, lurked outside the city gates, along with demons on the open road, sorcerers and witches in the forests, and darkness itself. Each night wolves across Europe emerged from the black, together with thieves, vagabonds, and brigands – strangers and strange beings all – carrying the threat of violence, misery, and disease.

As the largest and richest city in sixteenth-century Germany, a commercial center and trading hub, Augsburg was in many ways unique – unsurprising then that Montaigne, who considered all men his compatriots and who delighted in foreign travel, should want to go there. Concurring with the popular estimation of the city as “the most beautiful in Germany,” he remarked on the surprising tolerance of its inhabitants, Lutheran and Catholic parishioners who, he claimed, intermarried often. In such respects the city was a comparative oasis, once inside. But its heavily fortified


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Darrin M. McMahon on cosmopolitanism

efforts to keep terror beyond the gates reveal a more general phenomenon, one that Delumeau describes as the “permanent dialogue with fear” of so many Europeans in this age – as well as so many before and since. His historical account reminds us of what anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists might illustrate in different ways: *L’homme est un animal qui a peur.* Fear has a natural presence in social life.

Whether this fear is ineradicable is something that witnesses to our own age’s war on terror could stand to ponder. No doubt, a great many contemporary fears, like those of the inhabitants of sixteenth-century Augsburg, are figments of frenzied imaginations: devils beyond the city gates. Yet to deny in an age of global terrorism that there is more to fear than fear itself would be naïve. Indeed, one of the central tensions that all defenders of open societies – all cosmopolitans – must face in the early twenty-first century is how to balance legitimate concerns, and our responses to them, with commitments to international fellowship, cooperation, hospitality, and trust.

Montaigne’s entrance into Augsburg symbolizes the difficulties of achieving that balance. For Montaigne was an early cosmopolitan; he had branded the words of Terence – *Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto* – in the rafters above his study in the family chateau, an hour outside Bordeaux. As the word – from *kosmos* (universe) + *politeia* (citizen) – implies, a cosmopolitan views the world through the prism of the city, *polis*, in which each of us is a member, safe within its walls. The tension between envisioning that universal city and the effort to make the world in its image is revealing. For, like Montaigne entering free imperial Augsburg, all who would dwell in the universal city must overcome the ramparts of fear. As Europeans and Americans today insist on strengthening their walls and tightening their defenses, it is worthwhile looking a little more closely at the history of the cosmopolitan venture and the concerns that it has continually raised.

“Socrates was asked,” Montaigne writes, “where he came from. He replied not ‘Athens,’ but ‘The world.’ He, whose imagination was fuller and more extensive, embraced the universe as his city, and distributed his knowledge, his company, and his affections to all mankind, unlike us who look only at what is underfoot.”  

Although Socrates may not have said anything of the sort, already by Roman times he was widely regarded as the first of the world’s citizens. Here Montaigne draws on that legacy, most likely borrowing his words from Cicero, who tells us in the Tusculum Disputations, “When Socrates was asked which country he belonged to, he replied, ‘The world’; for he regarded himself as an inhabitant and citizen of every part of it.”  

Socrates, a *mundanus*, one who dwells in the world, was also *mundi*, of the world. Epictetus shares these descriptions in Greek in the Discourses, broadening only the scope: “If what philosophers say about the kinship between god and man is true, what else is left for men than to follow the example of Socrates, and when one is asked where one is from, never to say ‘I am an Athenian,’ or ‘I am a Corinthian,’ but ‘I am a citizen


of the universe?" 5 Plutarch likewise praises Socrates in De Exilio for saying that “he was no Athenian or Greek, but a ‘Cosmian’ (as one might say ‘Rhodian’ or ‘Corinthian’) because he did not shut himself up” within the narrow limits of Greece. 6

What might these descriptions mean? Unlike his Sophist contemporaries, Socrates, we know, was not born a traveling man; he only ventured beyond his native Athens on several occasions during military campaigns. To describe him as a cosmopolite then may seem odd. Indeed Montaigne judges Socrates’s famous refusal to choose exile over death at his trial as a “fastidious attitude for a man who considered the world his city.” Would it not have been better to venture forth, Montaigne wonders, judging that for his part “I shall never, I think, be so broken or so strictly attached to my own country” as to do what Socrates did? 7

Socrates chose instead to find the world in his city, the teeming metropolis of Athens, rather than the city in his world. He embraced there non-Athenians as students and friends. But it was less this acknowledged openness to foreigners (limited in practice, in any case, to Greeks) than his readiness to trace the frontiers of a greater kingdom in the midst of his own that most appealed to his later, classical admirers. For Epictetus, a Stoic, the true mark of the cosmopolite was the recognition, via reason, that “the greatest and most important and comprehensive of all things is the system in which men and god are associated.” Socrates clearly understood that system, understood that his true homeland was not the corner on which his paltry body was thrown down at birth. Why then, Epictetus demanded, “should not a man who understands this call himself a citizen of the universe? Why not a son of god?” 8 Plutarch, who was often critical of Stoic doctrines, nonetheless makes a similar point, immediately following his discussion of Socrates the “Cosmian,” with a fragment of poetry: “Seest thou yon boundless aether overhead / That holds the earth within its soft embraces?” “This,” Plutarch continues, “is the boundary of our native land, and here no one is either exile or foreigner or alien…. Here are the same fire, water, and air … the same laws for all, decreed by one commandment and one sovereignty…. Here one king and ruler, [one] God.” 9 The true homeland of the Cosmian lies in the heavens, and in the universal laws of reason and god.

Regardless of how little these characterizations tell us about Socrates’s actual views, they serve nicely to draw out a number of important tensions that have accompanied cosmopolitanism from the outset. First, they beg the question of the relationship between the land of one’s birth and upbringing – that random piece of land where one’s paltry body is thrown into being, the polis writ-small – and the broader cosmo-polis, the universal city. Those who tried Socrates infamously believed that the two alle-


8 Epictetus, 1.9.

9 Plutarch, On Exile, 601a – b.
giances were incompatible. And though Socrates himself denied the charge, he was forced to pay for his consistency with his life, remaining true only in death to the laws of the city of Athens and to those of his higher calling. We may be inclined to feel that a less chauvinistic regime would not demand this choice: had not Socrates in fact legitimately served both the polis and the cosmopolis by thinking globally while acting locally? Perhaps, but that possibility alone does not remove the tension itself – nor does it put to rest the suspicion that the cosmopolitan’s claims to allegiance rely rather heavily on a rejection, whether tacit or explicit, of the laws and norms of one’s native land.

This can be seen much more clearly in the teachings of a figure who is sometimes also described as the first cosmopolitan, the Cynic Diogenes. “Socrates gone mad,” as Plato called him, Diogenes saw himself, in any event, as a disciple of the Athenian sage. According to the Epicurean philosopher Diogenes Laertius, Diogenes the Cynic was “A homeless exile, to his country dead, / A wanderer who begs his daily bread,” a man who, when asked from whence he came, described himself as a citizen of the universe (kosmopolitēs). Kosmos, as the scholar H. C. Baldry reminds us, here means the whole of nature, the universe – not mankind. Kosmopolitēs, in other words, is a long way from cosmopolitan in any modern sense, a fact that comes across clearly when we appreciate that for Diogenes, as for the Cynic followers of Socrates more broadly, to be a citizen of the universe was overwhelmingly a negative ideal. Far from implying, say, the universal fellowship of all human beings, Diogenes’s description of himself as a kosmopolitēs implied his rejection of the norms and standards of civilized society as understood in its locus classicus, the polis. Rather than suggest that he was at home in every city, Diogenes’s description signified that he was indifferent to them all. A nomad without a fixed home, Diogenes the cosmopolite is a child of the universe, nature, and reason – but a stranger to men.

If the extreme case of Diogenes helps to draw out a tension implicit in cosmopolitanism from the start (the potential conflict between one’s allegiance to the part and to the whole), it also hints at a second characteristic worthy of our consideration: the ironically cult-like disposition of its early adherents. While the first cosmopolitans might have claimed the universe as their true home, they were at the same time surprisingly quick to recognize only those fellow citizens who perceived the world as did they, through the lens of reason. Socrates may not have looked contemptuously upon those lacking reason – he himself claimed to know nothing – but many of his disciples clearly did, above all the Cynics, who regarded the great mass of mankind as bumpkins and fools, slaves to prejudice, chauvinism, and partial attachments. To the extent that the Cynic can be said to have had countrymen at all, they were other sophoi, wise men like he, scattered across the face of the globe.

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This cosmopolitan tendency to view oneself as a creature apart is admittedly less pronounced in Stoic doctrine, particularly in its middle and later instantiations. Whereas an early Stoic like Chrysipus could stress that universal citizenship was open only to those who lived in keeping with universal laws, later Stoics tended to place greater emphasis on the unity of all humankind, governed alike by a divine principle of rationality, the *logos*. Yet even here the sectarian tendency is often not far below the surface, as in the passage from Epictetus cited above, after which he proceeds to argue that it is only “rational creatures,” those who “understand the administration of the universe,” who can properly be called a “citizen of the universe” and “a son of god.” “They alone are qualified by nature to associate with god, being connected to him by reason.” The citizen of the universe belongs to a divine elect.

Still, the thrust of Stoic doctrine was toward emphasizing the universal capacity for reason, and hence the potential fellowship of all in the broader *cosmopolis* that transcended any individual *polis* or state. Epictetus, after all, had been a slave, and admitted both slaves and women into his circle of followers. One of his admirers, the emperor Marcus Aurelius, brings out well the potential universal dynamic of Stoicism in a celebrated passage from his *Meditations*:

> If we have intelligence in common, so we have reason (*logos*), which makes us rational beings, and that practical reason which orders what we must or must not do. If so, then the law is also common to us and, if so, we are citizens. If so, we share a common government. And if so, the universe is, as it were, a city. For what other common government could one say is shared by all mankind? But if all who exercise their reason may be citizens of the universal *polis*, might not a truly universal state, ruled in keeping with the *logos* and natural law, make citizens of all? The emperor’s words point to a third possible tension lurking in the early cosmopolitan imagination: the impulse to build a *cosmopolis* by extending the rational *polis* to the ends of the earth. Might not the truly cosmopolitan state be an empire of the world?

The prospect of a cosmopolitan empire may well seem incongruous, a contradiction in terms. But in the ancient world, the most resolute force for breaking down the walls of the self-contained *polis* and knitting together the varied peoples of the world was first the emperor Alexander and then the legions of Rome. Plutarch undoubtedly waxed romantic when he said of the Macedonian warlord that he “desired to render all upon earth subject to one law of reason and one form of government and to reveal all men as one people.” It was nonetheless a seductive thought, appealing to many Romans, who found it flattering to think of the *patria* as an embryonic universal state. Livy famously seeded that thought in the first book of *The Rise of Rome*, where he records that Romulus descended from heaven after his death in order to appear before the citizen Proculus Ilius with a providential message: “Go announce to the Romans

13 Epictetus, 1.9.


that the gods in heaven will that my Rome shall be the capital of the world.”

In this vision, the true cosmopolis lay on the Tiber, its citizens masters of the universe.

Most Stoics, notably Cicero and Seneca, refrained from fully conflating the cosmopolis and the patria, working out instead theories of concentric duties, carefully relating the part to the whole. The practical effect of such speculation, however, was to reduce considerably the tension that had dogged Socrates and Diogenes between particular and general allegiance – between the laws of one’s country and universal law. The growth of the empire had much the same effect. Derek Heater points out, “As the Roman imperium expanded so it became highly convenient to relate local laws to general principles applicable to all. Thus, in the fullness of time the Romans came to equate the lex naturae (the law of nature) with their lex gentium (the law of peoples).” In serving Rome, it seemed, one served the universal will.

That comfortable – and comforting – conflation of one’s own values with those of the world has proved a recurrent temptation for cosmopolitans from imperial Rome to revolutionary Paris to twentieth-century New York. Cosmopolitan provincialism we might call the attitude in its milder form, of the sort caricatured by Saul Steinberg in his memorable View of the World from Ninth Avenue. Such narrow condescension is admittedly just a variation on the much broader human tendency to parochialism and prejudice, as evident in Podunk as in Paris. But just as it is especially galling to encounter cosmopolitans whose only claim to the label is the drink they hold in their hand, so was it maddening at times to be in Rome without the inclination to do as Romans do. A good many on the fringes of the Empire (or the countless conquered peoples within, we can be sure) received lofty pronouncements about the brotherhood of all while wailing and gnashing their teeth.

Jews and Christians were certainly among that number, though the latter would eventually turn the tables on their erstwhile oppressors, countering the persecutory cosmopolitanism of the likes of Marcus Aurelius, who vehemently attacked the followers of Jesus, with a cosmopolitanism all their own. Once again, it may seem strange to think of cosmopolitanism – or Christianity – in this light. Yet in the genealogy of the cosmopolitan tradition that ultimately flourishes in the eighteenth century and the writings of Kant, Christianity rivals Stoicism in order of importance.

The two movements were far from unrelated. Many early Christians, most notably Saint Paul, were familiar with and influenced by Stoic teachings, though it is a question of some debate how much. Nevertheless, the cosmopolitan overtones are clear in numerous scriptural passages. In the renewed self born in Christ, Paul tells us, “there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.”


17 Heater, World Citizenship, 21.


19 Colossians 3:11. All biblical citations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the New International Version, freely available online at www.biblegateway.com.
those baptized in Christ and clothed in Christ, we are told again in the Letter to the Galatians, “there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female.” And finally, in what is arguably the most striking such passage from Paul, the apostle writes to the Christian community in the great Roman city of Ephesus in Asia Minor to explain that “you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household.”

The original Greek of this passage is particularly revealing. The members of this new community cease to be xenoi (ξένοι) – foreigners – and also parakoi (παρακοί), what the ancient Greeks called metics, resident aliens who were allowed to live in the polis but denied the rights of citizens. Instead, Christians are to be sympolitai (συμπόλιται – cives in the Vulgate), fellow members or citizens of the polis and, what is more, members of the inner sanctum of God’s own οἶκος, from oikos, or household – what Aristotle took to be the fundamental building block of all cities. Strictly speaking there can be no xenophobia in Christ’s kingdom. All will be welcome, from strangers and outcasts to tax collectors and prostitutes, as full citizens in the city of God, a realm of universal harmony, fellowship, and peace.

It is the metaphor of the city, of course, built up from the intimacy of family bonds in the household of Christ, that St. Augustine would make famous in his magnum opus, the City of God. Augustine takes his title, De Civitate Dei, from several passages in the Psalms, which employ that phrase in association with Zion/Jerusalem. In Augustine’s reckoning, however, the city of God is neither a temporal nor geographic place, but rather a community scattered throughout the world and throughout time. Comprised of the mystical fellowship of the righteous and the saints, the city of God coexists in conflict with the city of man, the city of earthly striving whose inhabitants view the cosmos through the narrow prism of their own self-love and contingent needs. It is with reason that the archetypal earthly cities – Cain’s Cainoch and Romulus’s Rome – were founded on fratricide, for they are ever places of violence. But the city of man will be leveled at the end of time, just as “eternal” Rome itself was sacked in 410 shortly before Augustine began his master work, giving way to the final triumph of the heavenly city, the true Eternal City, the New Jerusalem whose kingdom shall know no end.

Numerous commentators have pointed out that Augustine’s conception of the two cities, though playing centrally on the Jewish antithesis of Babylon and the promised land of Jerusalem, also succeeds in Christianizing the Stoic division between the universal cosmopolis and the provincial polis or state. The true citizens of the city of God are once again, as in early Stoicism, an elect with the ability, power, and grace to see the universal ends of existence. Those who dwell in the city of man, by contrast,

21 Ephesians 2:19.
22 See Augustine, City of God, XI.1. The passages in the Vulgate and Septuagint are Psalms 45:5, 47:2, and 86:3, and in the New Revised Standard Version are Psalms 46:4, 48:1, and 87:3.
23 See, for example, R. W. Dyson, Augustine of Hippo: The Christian Transformation of Political Philosophy (London: Continuum, 2006), 32.
conceive their duties and purpose parochially, according to a narrow and restricted vision of humanity and the world.

Similarly, whereas the Stoic (and Socratic) division between the universal and the particular opened up the potential, if not always the reality, of conflict between the two, the Christian separation of the heavenly and earthly cities created an analogous prospect. True, the Christian injunction to render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s ostensibly removed this conflict altogether, ceding the political realm of earthly striving to the directors of the city of man. But from the earliest days of the church, when martyrs and millenarians were prepared to defy the authority of Rome, through to the struggles of Martin Luther – or Martin Luther King, Jr. – there have always been those who believed that to build God’s city one must challenge the city of man.

In practice, though, just as in Stoicism, an easier accommodation with local authority was more common. Indeed, as soon as they possessed the power, Christians proved that they, too, could be ruthless in persecuting all who resisted incorporation into the new kingdom. The city of God, after all, stood “against the pagans,” and pagans, it became clear, were not welcome there. When a group of bishops assembled in Toledo in 681 and called on the civil authorities to “behead all those guilty of non-Christian practices of whatsoever sort,” they were perhaps being somewhat shrill.24 But they were not acting far outside the norm. Clearly Christian “cosmopolitanism” could be just as ruthless as the variety proffered by Marcus Aurelius, as far too many Jews, Muslims, and “heretics” would learn in succeeding centuries, if they had not done so already.

Augustine himself would hardly have been surprised by these developments, knowing only too well that the history of the world presented a “vast mass of evils.”25 And because no one could know until the end of time who were the true citizens of the city of God, it was only to be expected that those of the earthly variety would mingle freely within the holy gates, using, perversely, even the church itself for their own ends. In the meantime, another metaphor presented itself to Augustine – not of the comfort and safety of the city-dweller, but of the loneliness of the wanderer, the pilgrim exiled and now looking for a final resting place, a true home. Aristotle had said that “he who by nature and not by mere accident is without a city (apo- lis), is either a bad man or above humanity.”26 Augustine in effect declared that this was the fate of us all.

There is irony in this metaphor of the Christian as exile, banished from Eden. For it was precisely the metaphor that Christians themselves, among others, would use to characterize the “wandering Jew,” in cruel echo of Abraham’s own claim before the Hittites, “I am an alien and a stranger among you.”27 To be an outcast, without land or a city of one’s own, would prove, as is known all too well, a dangerous fate. But the irony is even greater still. For the “pilgrim” church, founded on the bedrock

24 Ramsay MacMullen, Christianity & Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 16. The words are MacMullen’s own, part of a gripping chapter on Christian persecution in this period.

25 Augustine, City of God, XIX.8.

26 Aristotle, Politics, 1253a.

of Rome, saw itself as the heir to the majesty of the eternal city, and, like it, claimed dominium mundi, dominion of the world. The empire of the church would be catholic – katholikos, universal – and a revivified Rome would serve that end. From Constantine to Charlemagne to the Medieval Popes to the Habsburg Charles V, the dream (and imperfect reality) of a holy empire extending over the face of the globe made a mockery of the metaphor of the Christian wayfarer, living in exile in the world, a friendly stranger to all peoples, an enemy to none.

It was partly in reaction to that contradiction (one among others) that Christians and Classicists alike returned, ad fontes, to the wellsprings of their traditions, hoping to find in the unsullied wisdom of the ancients and the early church further insight into what it meant to be human in the world. The studia humanitatis, in this respect, when combined with a growing impatience with Christian hypocrisy and strife, would bear fruit in the sixteenth century when itinerant scholars like Erasmus, Justus Lipsius, and his friend, Michel de Montaigne, revitalized the cosmopolitan message imbedded in both the Christian and Stoic traditions. Casting scorn on the Catholic ideal of a world empire wrought by war, Erasmus begged in his Querela Pacis (1521), The Complaint of Peace, that “the promoters of bloodshed between nations … reflect, that this world, the whole of the planet called earth, is the common country of all who live and breathe upon it.” And he urged his Christian brethren to remember that “all men, however distinguished by political or accidental causes, are sprung from the same parents,” a proposition that he extended even to the East. “Is not the Turk a man – a brother?” he challenged. 28 For genuine Christians, enjoined to love their neighbors as themselves, it was morally incumbent to treat all human beings as members of the human family – not as Catholics, Dutchmen, or scholars, or any other particular sort, but as human beings qua human beings. Justus Lipsius, Erasmus’s countryman and a Christian humanist of similar stature, made much the same point in crafting his influential Neo-Stoic message that blended Christian principles with those of Cicero and Seneca. Considering himself, like the man Erasmus dubbed “Saint Socrates,” a citizen of the world, Lipsius argued that ties to country were but “external and accidental.” As for the foreigners beyond our borders, he asked, “Are they not men sprung out of the same stock with thee, living under the same globe?” “The whole world is our country, wheresoever is the race of mankind.” 29 Montaigne entirely agreed: “Not because Socrates said it, but because it is really my feeling, and perhaps excessively so, I consider all men my compatriots, and embrace a Pole as I do a Frenchman, setting the national bond after the universal and common one.” 30

Montaigne was prepared to take that sentiment further, arguing in effect that even cannibals are people, too, in his celebrated essay “Des Cannibales,” which pleaded for Europeans’ tolerance and


understanding as they encountered the very different cultures of the New World. There is poignancy to that plea, as in Erasmus’s and Lipsius’s calls for international peace and fellowship, coming as they did amidst the consolidation and growth of European empire across the seas, and of the bitter religious struggles at home that would rage at least until 1648 and the Treaty of Westphalia. It is strangely symbolic that the word cosmopolite in French makes a first, fleeting appearance in the sixteenth century, at almost the very time Montaigne wrote. But it would not register an indelible impression until the eighteenth century, the siècle des lumières.

Only then, more fully conscious of the horrors of intolerance and the costs of oppression, could small groups of enlightened Europeans and Americans begin the task of drawing out the implications of the cosmopolitan doctrines that had preceded them, slowly secularizing, politicizing, and proselytizing the Stoic and Christian belief that all human beings were God’s creatures, that all were worthy citizens in the universal city of humanity. Defending tolerance, while preaching humanity’s common patrimony of reason, they asserted the equality of all men (and gradually of all women, too), putting forth a doctrine of rights owed to every human being by virtue of being human. In unprecedented fashion, enlightened authors began to argue against empire, as Sankar Muthu has demonstrated in a rich and important book.

And they praised the benefits of foreign travel and international openness, commerce, and exchange.

That is a much larger story, one that has been told well, most recently by a contributor to this volume, who reminds us that to study cosmopolitanism in the age of its greatest articulation, the Age of Enlightenment, is to confront the need to move beyond theory to the realm of cultural practice. Theorists could – and did – write nobly in the eighteenth century, and in greater volume than ever before, of the importance of cosmopolitan ideals, of the need to embrace the foreign in our midst, to recognize the common humanity of men and women beyond our borders, to be, as Diderot put it memorably, “strangers nowhere in the world.” But it was ultimately the attempt to put those ideals into practice – to realize them in person, not only in print – that constitutes the great, unfinished legacy of this cosmopolitan age. As the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah says, cosmopolitanism is less a solution than a challenge.

In small enclaves like Masonic lodges and houses of global commerce in the eighteenth century, in the international republic of letters and the republican international, men and women began to take up that challenge, seeking to realize a world that transcended frontiers, that emphasized the common humanity of those within their midst, and that broke down the ramparts of fear that would keep human beings apart.

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However imperfect these efforts, we should be grateful for them; such men and women were pioneers. But we should also pay heed to the reactions they provoked. For, consistent with the themes of anti-cosmopolitan thinking both before and since, they remind us once again of the defenses that men and women will put in place to guard their citadels, to surround citizens of the world or keep them beyond the gates. A “sect,” opponents cried, a dangerous “cabal,” a “conspiracy” intent on undermining altars and thrones – these were the charges that cosmopolites and their enclaves drew in the eighteenth century and well after. “Rootless cosmopolitans” – freemasons and philosophers, international financiers and Jews – dissolved the natural bonds of blood, family, and soil that kept us grounded in the world. Abstract and anonymous, like the cities in which they drifted – cesspools of corruption, disaffection, and anomie – cosmopolitans were cold calculators, creatures of reason who conceived grand schemes for humanity but failed to relate to human beings. Cosmopolitans were traitors, their enemies charged, who undermined the natural order and spurned the sublime affections of patriotism and love. And they were hypocrites who, however much they might protest the fact, were bent on world conquest, craving power in place of peace. When, at the end of the century, French Revolutionaries publicly declared their cosmopolitan zeal, enfranchising world citizens like Joseph Priestly and Thomas Paine, while sending their armies out to conquer tens of thousands more, not a few observers believed they had seen the true face of cosmopolitanism in the glint of a sword.

We are familiar with the most vehement movements that made use of these themes, the volkish and nationalist parties of the extreme right that flourished into the twentieth century and reached their nadir in fascism and Hitler. Stalin likewise inveighed against rootless and evil-minded cosmopolitans, by which he meant Jews, for their alleged treason to the fatherland; he dealt with them accordingly. But the resistance to cosmopolitanism since the eighteenth century has been much broader and more diffuse than that. It is worth recalling that Rousseau, whose position on this (as in most matters) was conflicted, nonetheless decried the corruption of cities and the “sect” of their philosophic champions, those prétendues cosmopolites “who, justifying their love of the fatherland by means of their love of the human race, boast of loving everyone in order to have the right to love no one.” Nor should such criticism be lightly dismissed, for it raises the important question, posed seriously by Burke among others, of just

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35 On these and the following charges leveled in the eighteenth century, see Darrin M. McMahon, Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).


how one can love humankind in any meaningful way, without first loving our own “subdivision,” our own “little platoon.”

Even Kant, the greatest of cosmopolitanism’s eighteenth-century advocates entertained doubts on this score, and such doubts have long endured. In nineteenth-century American fiction – Emerson, Melville, and Poe, for example – the cosmopolitan is frequently depicted in decidedly negative terms as a chameleon, untrustworthy, insincere, all surface and no substance. Even more recently, Appiah, a resolute defender of cosmopolitanism, opens his book on the subject by acknowledging the negative associations the word still frequently invokes: “You imagine a Comme des Garçons-clad sophisticate with a platinum frequent-flyer card…. And you wince.”

The longstanding suspicion that the cosmopolitan is a creature apart – a poseur, an elitist, a well-healed fop – is very much alive, as is the concern that cosmopolitans would obliterate all manner of difference in the name of universal values. In the nineteenth century, this was a favorite theme of Marx and Engels, who railed against what they called the “private-egotistical cosmopolitanism of free trade,” while describing how the artillery of the market would knock down all Chinese walls. It is not difficult to hear overtones of that concern in the language of contemporary opponents of globalization. And something of the same fear is evident in the most determined defenders of multicultural difference, who tend to see cosmopolitanism as they see the Enlightenment: a hegemonic force masquerading as truth. In these views, the cosmopolis resembles more the cold and anonymous city of global capital portrayed in Don Delillo’s novel of that name than a paradise on earth.

As for the oldest of anti-cosmopolitan accusations – that the citizen of the world is a threat to the fatherland – we need only open a newspaper in Europe or America to know that this fear is still with us, and busy putting up walls. Cosmopolitans might choose to protest that charge, but perhaps it is better simply to own it, taking our cue from Montaigne, who confessed that he felt all men were his compatriots – “perhaps excessively”:

I am scarcely infatuated with the sweetness of my native air. Brand-new acquaintances that are wholly of my own choice seem to me well worth those other common chance acquaintances of the neighborhood. Friendships purely of our own acquisition usually surpass those to which community of climate or of blood binds us. Nature has put us into the world free and unfettered; we imprison ourselves in certain narrow districts, like the kings of Persia, who bound themselves never to drink any other water than that of the river Chaspes, stupidly gave up their right to use any other waters, and dried up all the rest of the world as far as they were concerned.


39 Kant addresses these doubts in his Doctrine of Virtue and his lectures on ethics from 1793. See the discussion in Muthu, Enlightenment Against Empire, 152 – 155.


A country that will not make room for such “bad” citizens as this should be moved to a place where the waters run more freely, so that others might drink from the wellsprings of the world in peace.

Fear & trembling, strangers & strange lands