Cosmopolitanism and International Relations Theory
To the memory of my beloved father
Neville Fogg Beardsworth
1924–2007
Cosmopolitanism and International Relations Theory

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Introduction

The aim of this book is to relate the concerns of cosmopolitanism to the discipline of International Relations and its field, international relations and world politics. The principles of cosmopolitanism – together with the cosmopolitan disposition towards international relations to which they lead – are often referred to or discussed in IR literature (earlier examples are Bull, 1977; Carr, 2001; Morgenthau, 2004; more recent examples flourish: for example, C. Brown, 1992 and 2002; Keohane and Nye, 2003; Linklater, 1998; Ruggie, 2003). Equally, both moral and political philosophy and political theory increasingly refer to international relations and the literature of IR (for example: Beitz, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c; Brock and Brighouse, 2005; Caney, 2005; Erskine, 2008a; Held, 1995a; Nussbaum, 1998). Given deepening dependence between states, between peoples and between individuals, it is understandable that there is this parallel growth in interdisciplinary reference between philosophy, political theory and IR.

Since specific problems facing actors in the field of world politics are of an increasingly global nature, and since the solutions to them call for both global cooperation and global vision, the relations between the constructs of cosmopolitanism and those of IR need, however, to be explored more systematically. What are feasible cosmopolitan commitments in world politics? What are the important and effective agents for these commitments in this field? How does one respond to the persistent IR charge that cosmopolitan commitments are well-intentioned, but idealistic, if not
dangerous? How does one respond to the similar charge that, when pitched pragmatically, they are ultimately complicit with liberal hegemony or with global liberal governance, and that cosmopolitan behaviour in the field of international relations must lead to elitism? These types of question need to be squarely addressed by creating a reflective space of debate between cosmopolitanism and IR. The moral and political philosophy of cosmopolitanism is fairly secured, although there are distinct positions assumed within it. What is not secured is the relation between the constructs of cosmopolitanism and those of international relations in a globalizing world. For this, more interdisciplinary dialogue between cosmopolitanism and the theory orienting IR thinking and research is required. Such dialogue is the subject of this book.

To orchestrate this dialogue, I have made several assumptions and one decision. Before turning to the substantive content of the book, I wish to rehearse them.3

(1) This book is theoretical and is theoretical on several levels. In considering the relation between cosmopolitanism and international relations, I turn to specific schools of IR theory and debate the ways in which these schools frame international relations and the way in which cosmopolitan thought can effectively respond to these framings. To make this step, I assume that theory is vital to cognition in the first place, and that, despite constituting distinct ways of theorizing the world, cosmopolitanism and IR theory are necessarily talking to each other because they are both constructs of the world. Cosmopolitan theory and IR theory are distinct from each other in one simple sense: the first is more normatively minded (moral framing of what should be the case); the second more empirically minded (explanatory framing of what is the case). Normative IR theory has worked with this normative/empirical distinction in recent years from within IR theory (Beitz, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c; C. Brown, 1992 and 2002; Erskine, 2008a; Frost, 1996). The assumption of the book is the following in this context: in a world of growing interdependence, the theoretical constructs of cosmopolitanism have increasing purchase on empirical reality with regard to a specific range of issues: international security, international human rights, financial and economic regulation, climate change mitigation, development, health and sustainability, and intercultural dialogue. Consequently, while the difference between normative theory and empirical theory remains ever-important, the actual distinction between the normative and the empirical in the domain of world politics is becoming blurred. Thus, qua constructs of the world within growing empirical interdependence, the moral and political thought of cosmopolitanism and IR theory are necessarily ever-more related to each other. The fact that there is an increasing volume of books on cosmopolitanism (see Brown and
Held, 2010) and that students of IR appear increasingly interested in cosmopolitan responses to international conflict and cooperation would seem to testify to this convergence of levels of interest, even if cosmopolitanism could, and should, never become an empirical theory in the heuristic tradition of social scientific theory (see Lakatos, 1970; Keohane, 1986, pp. 1–24). Cosmopolitanism constitutes a normative theory in relation to the field of world politics, but its positions on specific areas of this field are ‘empirically meaningful’ (to use the language of rational choice theory) given growing dependence between states. A dialogue between contemporary cosmopolitan ideas, on the one hand, and IR theory, on the other, is thus timely and fruitful.

This first assumption on theoretical convergence can be deepened by three further theoretical remarks.

First, it is commonplace within IR theory that methodological pluralism prevails, since international political reality is too complex for one type of abstraction to have descriptive or explanatory monopoly. Unlike in the physical sciences, there is no attempt to claim a unified theory of the political real. Human society is multilayered; its agents are at the same time its observers, which renders theoretical unification a priori impossible. One’s theory is thus apt to change given the nature, and limits, of the object analysed. It makes little sense, for instance, to reflect upon interstate violence in the terms of the International Criminal Court. Conversely, it makes every sense to theorize state responsibility towards other states and their citizens as well as towards its own citizens in terms of the institutional evolution of international law. As the plurality of IR theories indicates, the theoretical frame and the chosen unit of analysis must fit. Given this plurality, an articulated relation between a moral and political philosophy of the world, like cosmopolitanism, and the theorization of world politics can help one to understand what one is theorizing and how one is theorizing when framing the emerging political entity called ‘global politics’.

Second, normative theory in IR since the 1990s has helped many students of IR understand the immanence of ethics to questions of power in international affairs. As dependence between states increases, the question of legitimate behaviour between states also increases (Buchanan, 2003; Clark, 2005; Lebow, 2003). Ethics and law, that is, become part and parcel of one’s understanding of international politics as processes of globalisation deepen. This means that the relation between morality and politics grows in intricacy, the more socially dense international relations become. I make a lot of this historico-sociological argument in the book. It was first formulated on the domestic level by the sociologist Norbert Elias (1982); it is applied to the global level by Andrew Linklater (2002, 2007a,
A mutually self-excluding distinction between the normative and the positive in social science is thereby undone. In other words, while not explanatory, normative IR theory proceeds on the basis that its reflections on the principles of political behaviour and loyalty speak to empirical reality. Without this purchase upon the latter, such reflection would simply not be made in the first place. As a normative theory, cosmopolitanism itself holds a strong place in any reflection on international and supranational terms of political legitimacy. Since political legitimacy is now an immediate concern of global power structures, cosmopolitanism has, again, empirical meaning.

Third, the normative status of cosmopolitan thought is no longer distinct from empirical political reality as such. As several cosmopolitan commentaries on international law point out (see Cabrera, 2004; Hayden, 2005; Held, 2004; Robertson, 2002), normative arguments about the basic needs and interests of human beings are embedded in the international human rights regime. Following Stephen Krasner’s classic definition, an international regime is composed of a set of ‘implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures around which actors’ expectations converge in a given area of international relations’ (1983, p. 2). The international human rights regime is one such body of norms, rules and expectations that pertain to the relations between all signatory governments and their citizens, as well as to those between these governments and international or stateless refugees. Human rights constitute a normative understanding of human relations: they posit what relations between human beings as human beings should be. As an international regime, this normative framework has, precisely, effects in the real, although these effects remain notoriously uneven (see C. Brown, 2002 and 2005, pp. 221–46). Despite this unevenness, it is nevertheless correct for cosmopolitans to claim that, with the rights regime, normative theory has an immanent relation to the real as such. This means again that the standard social science distinction between the normative and the empirical offers too crude a theorization of reality and that affirmation of the human rights regime places cosmopolitanism squarely within IR theoretical framings of twenty-first-century political reality (see, particularly, Hayden, 2005 and 2008).

By looking at the relation between cosmopolitanism and international relations through debate on their respective theories, this book is assuming, then, several points under my first basic assumption of theoretical convergence. These theories are framing the same complex object of international reality; they therefore provide a privileged access to mutual debate. Although they are framing it differently and/or their emphasis is
different, this difference fits methodological pluralism within the discipline of IR. Given increasing dependence between states and the consequences of this interdependence (I alluded above to change in terms of political legitimacy and to the rise of international regimes), the normative status of cosmopolitan theory has growing purchase on empirical international reality. Prevalent distinctions in social science between the normative and the empirical are thereby unmade. My own use of theory, when I stage debate between cosmopolitanism and IR theory, will be varied and tiered, according to the specific object analysed within the schools of IR theory selected. For example, power, global justice, international political economy and universalism form, respectively, different types of theoretical object and require different theoretical treatments within the overarching debate between cosmopolitanism and IR as a whole. I return to this very last point later in the introduction.

(2) My second basic assumption narrows the field of debate that I seek at a second level and makes straightforward sense of my choice of IR theoretical schools elaborated in point (3) below. This book considers cosmopolitanism in relation to basic liberal tenets and therefore rehearses cosmopolitan concerns as a whole in the context of modern liberalism and its avatars. This will seem to some a rather arbitrary, indeed violent circumscription. For diverse, if not opposing reasons, many theorists are today concerned to widen critical debate around a common humanity beyond liberal tenets (for example: Appiah, 2006; Dallmayr, 2004 and 2010; Walker, 2010). Furthermore, as Simon Caney rightly notes in *Justice Beyond Borders*, there are a series of reasons why cosmopolitanism and liberalism cannot be aligned (2005, pp. 4–6). Cosmopolitan tenets can be found in many religions; the philosophy of cosmopolitanism has a long intellectual history that well pre-dates liberalism; some committed to liberal principles (in particular, the outstanding worth of the individual) are not cosmopolitan (John Rawls, for example), while cosmopolitan understanding in Buddhism or Confucianism is not liberal. There are thus ‘both non-liberal cosmopolitans and non-cosmopolitan liberals’ (ibid., p. 6). These reminders regarding the complexity of cosmopolitan discourse are important, especially for cross-cultural dialogue in a globalized world (see Dallmayr, 2002; Held and Moore, 2008). The recent escalation of violence between aggressive universalism and Islamic fundamentalism is testament to the importance of cross-cultural and interreligious exchange in world politics (Dallmayr, 2004). It is also important to emphasize, in this context of bringing together cosmopolitanism and liberalism, the critical distinction between ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ cosmopolitanism.4