Luke Ulas: *Being Cosmopolitan: A Political Approach.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025. Pp. vii, 209.)

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I am a cosmopolitan. Or at least I thought I was. After reading Luke Ulas' fascinating new book I am not so sure. In response to Micheal Blake's assertion that a moral understanding of cosmopolitanism as a 'commitment to global moral equality' has rendered the concept useless, and one 'we would do better to retire…entirely'[1], Ulas seeks to offer an alternative 'thoroughly political perspective' (2). Rather than understanding cosmopolitanism as requiring the internalisation of '*any* particular moral commitments' Ulas argues that, understood politically, 'to be cosmopolitan is to imagine the existence of a global public to which certain issues – or global public affairs – are understood to obtain' (2).

If we take Diogenes the Cynic's famous declaration to be a citizen (*polites*) of the world (*cosmos*) as our starting point, as Ulas wryly notes theoretical treatments of the subject inevitably do (4), a political approach focuses on how he saw the world – the nature of his social imaginary – rather than on his moral commitments. The argument of the book leads us to some interesting places, offering interventions in a range of contemporary cosmopolitan debates (the motivation problem, the global demos problem, decoloniality). On Ulas' approach, it is certainly not the case that (as Blake claimed) 'we are all cosmopolitans now'.[2] Instead, many self-declared cosmopolitans turn out not to be cosmopolitans at all, and some parties who explicitly reject any commitments to global moral equality look like they are in fact cosmopolitans.

Ulas' draws on Charles Taylor's work on the social imaginary to develop an account of what it means to imagine a global public. However, Ulas departs from Taylor in taking a more pluralistic approach and in understanding social imaginaries as not necessarily intersubjective – for Ulas an individual can inhabit a distinct cosmopolitan imaginary shared with no one (16). Ulas' account is complex and

[1] Blake, Michael. 2013. 'We Are All Cosmopolitans Now', in Gillian Brock (ed.) Cosmopolitanism versus Non-Cosmopolitanism: Critiques, Defenses, Reconceptualizations. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 35-62. p.36.
[2] Blake, 2013 p.36.

nuanced, but a key distinction is that a global public can be imagined in two ways: i. as 'a distinct 'site' to which certain normative claims apply' (*a merely applicative public*), or ii. also as 'an agent invested with normative authority with respect to the issue(s) in question' (*a normatively authoritative public*) (17-18).

Imagining a global public in either way renders certain acts of political contestation cosmopolitan (or cosmopolitical) on Ulas' understanding. In the former case, we can imagine a moral cosmopolitan 'contesting 'natural' human rights claims with other members of a perceived global public' and in the latter case a global democrat 'contesting issues with another perceived 'world citizen'' (30). A key upshot of this is that, as a global public must be 'an ontologically distinct entity', imagining a global political constituency does not equate imaging a global public (29). Accordingly, traditional international relations, 'understood as a global constituency of states' is not cosmopolitical, as the assertion of state sovereignty means there is no ontologically distinct entity (29). As we find out later, this tension between state sovereignty and a 'thoroughly political understanding' of cosmopolitanism will yield some controversial conclusions.

Once the account has been set out, the book moves through different contemporary iterations of cosmopolitanism applying this novel lens. Chapter 2 examines mainstream cosmopolitans of both the global justice and the global democracy variants. Ulas argues that although mainstream cosmopolitans are clearly engaged in political contestation (contra the realist charge that these approaches are essentially apolitical), even if they are not theorists of political contestation, whether or not they are cosmopolitical is less clear. Although mainstream cosmopolitans appear to imagine a global public to which their prescriptions apply, whether this is genuinely an ontologically distinct entity, is called into question by their 'ambivalence with respect to the state system' (68). Chapter 3 focuses on contestatory cosmopolitanism, arguing that despite their explicitly 'political' focus, contestatory cosmopolitans are less likely to be examples of cosmopolitical subjectivity than mainstream theorists as the transnational networks they discuss and sometimes address themselves to do not constitute a global public (94). Chapter 4 develops the book's most controversial claim, that 'cosmopolitical subjectivity and the social imaginary of a world of self-determining peoples' are incompatible.

Therefore '[i]f we want to be cosmopolitical then we will need to give up on the idea of peoples as self-determining' (124). This is perhaps the most challenging of Ulas' conclusions and one that will likely receive the most push back.

Chapter 5 offers an examination of global pluralism vs global holism, offering a rich discussion of the topic and picking up on the books second major controversial (and slightly depressing) theme, that there are both multiple holist and multiple pluralist global imaginaries and that although these may be cosmopolitical they will sometimes be normatively incompatible and mutually unintelligible. This theme is continued into the final chapter which emphasises that just as communist and fascist citizens of the same state will inhabit incompatible national imaginaries, the same is true at the global level, with various cosmopolitical actors operating with incompatible conceptions of global publics (186). As Ulas argues, once we understand cosmopolitanism politically, then 'we must allow that even moral cosmopolitans can meet each other with mutual confusion, even antipathy, and not always as citizens of the *same* imagined world' (186).

By detaching cosmopolitanism from any particular moral commitments, we end up with plenty of self-professed cosmopolitans being excluded on Ulas' definition. Similarly, we end up with some positions that reject 'global moral equality' being included. Drawing on Manfred Steger, Ulas discusses 'Jihadist globalism', with its imaginary of an Ummah (Islamic community) as a kind of global public as an example of the latter (177). I was left pondering which historic imperialist projects with global ambitions might fall within the definition. The seemingly counterintuitive implications here are of course the point as Ulas is seeking to detach the concept of cosmopolitanism from specific moral commitments. Ulas is also explicit that his account is intended to supplement moral and institutional accounts of cosmopolitanism rather than to serve as a replacement. As he notes, 'the cosmopolitical actor will often be the moral cosmopolitan observed from another angle' (36) – although in other cases they will be someone quite different entirely.

It might be objected that extending the term 'cosmopolitan' to (some) views that deny the moral equality of all dangerously legitimises these views in some way. This is a fair point, and one Ulas recognises (36). Of course, for this to be a genuine concern the public at large would have to pay far

more attention to the finer points of academic political theory than they are ever likely to. We can also draw an analogy here with cultural cosmopolitanism, which also entails no specific moral commitments.

In a disclosure of sorts, I should say that Luke and myself co-run the *Motivating Cosmopolitan Research Network*. After reading this fascinating book I am left wondering, not only about my own status as a cosmopolitan, but whether we are both seeking to motivate the same thing.