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THE EMANCIPATORY POTENTIAL OF COSMOPOLITANISM:  
ON SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION THROUGH DISRUPTIVE PRACTICES  
GUIDED BY UNIVERSALISTIC ASPIRATIONS

Review of: James D. Ingram (2013) *Radical Cosmopolitics: The Ethics and Politics of Democratic Universalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 352 pp.

Krisis 2014, Issue 2  
[www.krisis.eu](http://www.krisis.eu)

‘The question was put to him what country he was from, and Diogenes replied, “I am a citizen of the world.”’ Diogenes’ (404-423 BC) answer expresses a cosmopolitan consciousness: the recognition that we are, or can and should be, world citizens. Cosmopolitanism, in its traditional meaning, thus expresses the fact, possibility, or imperative of a certain universality, namely of the oneness of humankind. Although invented some twenty-five hundred years ago, cosmopolitanism has had a particularly strong appeal over the last two decades; as our shrinking world has increasingly implied a qualitative change in the way and the extent to which people relate to and depend on one another across borders: the world seems to be becoming ‘more global’ - interconnected, interdependent, and, in this sense, unified.

However, the cosmopolitan project is highly contested and subjected to extensive criticism. As Ingram points out already in the very beginning of his book, quoting Timothy Brennan: ‘If we wished to capture the essence of cosmopolitanism in a single formula, it would be this. It is a discourse of

the universal that is inherently local – a locality that’s always surreptitiously imperial’ (7). Or, in Ingram’s own words, ‘all ethical and political visions that have aspired to universality have ended up betraying it. Cosmopolitanism has been intimately tied to world-spanning empires and proselytizing religions; it has been carried by a stubborn elitism that runs from its classical origins to today’s globe-trotting elites; it has inspired and justified many of history’s most devastating projects, from holy war through colonialism and Communism to capitalist globalization’ (7).

This being stated the reader barely has time to question why Ingram has nevertheless conducted his intensive study titled *Radical Cosmopolitics*. According to Ingram it is equally clear that, despite all these disappointments and reversals, we should still persist in our universalistic aspirations, because, Ingram contends, perversions of the universal can be most effectively fought on the ground of the universal. This sums up the scope and perspective of Ingram’s ambitious project: Ingram does not only carefully scrutinize the paradoxical functioning of cosmopolitanism by bringing into focus the tension between what cosmopolitanism stands for and what has been done in actual terms (part 1), but he also utilizes a method of immanent critique to rethink the concept of cosmopolitanism as a critical tool which enables the fight against these perversions, working to revitalize and embody cosmopolitanism’s emancipatory and egalitarian character (part 2).

The originality of this study lies in Ingram’s strong emphasis on cosmopolitanism’s critical potential, stating that if cosmopolitanism always aspires to the universal, to framing and relating the world as a whole, then one way of understanding it is to envision it as a series of attempts *to challenge* and introduce difference into how we as humans relate to our contexts. The key to his thinking about universalism is to recognize it as having disruptive potential, which always functions in contextual circumstances. This means that cosmopolitanism has to prioritize political action through the applicable universal norms that it develops and articulates in local contexts, rather than to focus primarily on abstract moral principles or guidelines that somehow need to be implemented in social reality.

By rethinking cosmopolitanism as an instrument for social critique that fights exclusion and is accessible to all, Ingram recovers its emancipatory capacity. As such, his study fits seamlessly into the project of critical social theory which aims to examine obstacles posed by social arrangements, with the purpose of bringing about social change for the better<sup>1</sup>. By taking up this challenge for cosmopolitanism, informed by his commitment to the demand for a truer cosmopolitics, Ingram's work is of tremendous value for the series *New Directions in Critical Theory*.

Ingram starts his critical inquiry by bringing into focus how contemporary cosmopolitanism in general is afflicted by internal tensions and contradictions (Part I). Concerned with these tensions, Ingram investigates universalism in history (Chapter 1). Following cosmopolitanism as a series of intellectual and political movements, he points out that cosmopolitanism in its universalistic ambitions always stands in some relation to the real-world institutions and tendencies that appear to be unifying the world at a given moment (Roman conquest, Christianity, colonialism or capitalism). Through this general historical outline Ingram reveals the cosmopolitan universal as a disguised particular, and shows that this hegemonic functioning persists through different forms and in different periods. This works to render these varieties of cosmopolitanism as inherently ambiguous.

In addition to this analysis of the conventional narrative of cosmopolitanism, Ingram extensively discusses Nussbaum's influential essay 'Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism'<sup>2</sup>, published in 1994 in the *Boston Review*, indicating that cosmopolitanism can be seen as a distinctive practice that interrupts a given discursive field. Despite the fact that cosmopolitanism articulates the ideal of a universal humanity, which has the desire to abstract, generalize, and transcend, it is always contextual, defined through its juxtaposition to a given particularism or parochialism. Stating that it would not occur to anyone to advocate cosmopolitanism except in response to some narrower claim of a tribe, polis, community, or state, Ingram emphasizes its disruptive, critical character, which he considers to be most promising for rethinking cosmopolitanism in order to overcome its aforementioned inherent tensions.

However, before advocating his approach to radical cosmopolitanism in chapter 2, 'Cosmopolitics in Ethics: Tensions of the universal', Ingram further examines how the tensions present in cosmopolitanism's different historical occurrences arise when attempts are made to arrive at a universal morality articulating the good for all human beings. Ingram takes the efforts of Kant and Nussbaum as paradigmatic cases to illustrate these tensions. Whereas Kant's definition of the universal 'humanity' implies a whole system of hierarchies – reason over emotion, activity over passivity – which map onto different kinds of people in highly prejudicial ways (83), Nussbaum directly appeals to a universal human nature (what she calls 'Aristotelian essentialism'), expressing her conviction that she knows better than others what is good for them. Through an examination of these influential thinkers, Ingram shows that what appeared as a problem of the content of universalism in Kant's humanism, emerges as a problem of position in Nussbaum's: speaking on behalf of humanity assumes an asymmetrical epistemic and practical position above ordinary agents. (84)

This asymmetry problem is at the heart of discussions within critical social theory. It refers to the assumption that from their critical perspective the theorist is able to gain an understanding of what is *really* going on in social reality. The theorist recognizes socio-economic structures, hidden interests, and hegemonic power relations that take place behind agents' backs and constitutes a 'false consciousness' that causes a distortion of the ordinary agents. Therefore, the asymmetry dogma advocates a strict separation of perspectives between the critic and the ordinary agents that is being talked about – a separation that is assumed by Nussbaum as well – allowing the theorist to install himself in a position from which he has authority over the deluded agents.

Although Ingram does not elaborate in great length on this central problem of asymmetry, he does advocate that one way of avoiding the problem is to determine the good for others while insisting that all have a say. Rather than specify what the universal is, the theorist should specify what would be involved in saying what it is. By taking this route, procedural universalism emerges as an immanent correction to the problems of substantive universalism. However, this does not solve the problem of false

consciousness. Without mentioning this term, Ingram encounters this problem when discussing Habermas' discourse ethics and communicative rationality. Although Habermas' procedure is to set out the trajectory of an ongoing deliberation to be carried out by those actually affected, it is still bound to the ideal speech situation (94). This situation has a problematically indeterminate character, for it is impossible to determine what everyone everywhere would agree to under ideal conditions. However, at the same time this principle is irreducible, for in reality oppressive social arrangements and ideologies entails that people are misguided about their true needs, and instead form adapted preferences.

In response to these problems of substantial and procedural universalism, which attempt to generalize the scope of the moral-ethical concerns of cosmopolitanism, Ingram puts forward his approach of critical-democratic cosmopolitics. He argues that universal claims are always made in a specific context, and these claims should fight hidden particularisms. The pursuit of universalism then consists in an endless assault on the limits of the accepted and the thinkable.

After examining how political versions of cosmopolitanism have violated the principle of a more equal distribution of power and resources when seeking to realize it (Chapter 3), Ingram further develops the moral and political core of this critical-democratic cosmopolitics in Part 2. This second part of the book is devoted to looking in the opposite direction. This means Ingram insists that the principle of freedom/equality can be realized directly, by the affected individuals and groups themselves, when necessary against hegemonic understandings and institutionalizations of the universal. To put his approach forward, Ingram manoeuvres with admirable clarity through the bodies of thought of critical heavyweights, such as Judith Butler, Pierre Bourdieu, Hannah Arendt, Etienne Balibar and Jacques Ranciere, and as such reframes and advances contributions that have already been made in the field of cosmopolitanism.

In the fourth chapter Ingram returns to moral-ethical universalism and the problem that any universal norm or idea always turns out to be particular in its conception or application. For a solution to this problem,

Ingram looks to Judith Butler's work on universalism. Butler argues that we cannot articulate the universal as such. Instead it is best advanced through the critique of false universals. From Butler Ingram takes his understanding of the universal as a dynamic of contestation, but he criticizes her approach for not articulating its normative bases - how, that is, this critique could itself be oriented by the ideal of equal freedom. However, Ingram himself does not provide a straightforwardly positive account of the concepts of freedom and equality either. Instead, for a corrective to Butler's work, he turns to Pierre Bourdieu, showing how Bourdieu's descriptions of social relations in terms of power, domination, exclusion and discrimination, by simple inversion provide him with an evaluative standard of equality: equal inclusion in social life (175).

Through the works of Butler and Bourdieu, Ingram helps us see cosmopolitanism as a process of universalization rather than as the simple application of the principle of universality (182). However, we have not yet seen how this might function as a politics. This is the theme of Chapter 5, in which Ingram attempts to show how to conceive of cosmopolitics, a politics of universalism, as a principle of democratic contestation. Again, the key is to understand universality as emerging from the bottom up through challenges to denials of universal values, first and foremost that of equal freedom. Just as Ingram argues with regard to universalism that we should give up the search for universal norms and values and should look instead to the dynamics through which norms become *more universal*, in this chapter he argues that we are better off considering the politics through which practices and institutions can become *more democratic* (188). Expressing the idea in political terms, however, requires a basic shift in the perspective of democratic theory, for which Ingram turns to the counter-tradition of political theory that dissociates democratic politics from the state and its institutions, defining it instead as a kind of action (202). Taking Arendt's insight of political action as holding something new into it, Ingram adds insights from other authors in this tradition, such as Etienne Balibar and Jacques Ranciere, to show how such political action can be understood as a vehicle of democratic transformation (223). Democracy in his understanding is an open-ended logic of transformation that seeks to realize the promise of political equality, sometimes against

the very institutions that claim to embody it. 'On this view, democratic politics can be seen as the realization of the universalistic content of modern democracy through always particular struggles, an infinitely repeatable process by which people struggle to expand their autonomy to match the scale of the forces that determine their lives' (18).

In the final chapter Ingram uses the insights developed over the course of the book to criticize some common understandings on the politics of human rights, and to show the benefits of thinking about them as a critical-democratic politics of universalization. Ingram begins by showing a paradox in the liberal conception of human rights, for it understands these rights as protection from political power, yet it can only call upon the same kind of power for their enforcement. In contrast, the deliberative conception figures human rights politics as the institutionalization of right by legal means, but does not indicate what we should do when they are not. More generally speaking, Ingram argues strongly against what he calls bad idealism - the search for the best moral arguments and normative visions, which after being invented only need to be implemented. As illustrated by the human right approaches, this bad idealism abstracts away from the status quo and its fetishism of ends is insensitive to its means which often have contrary effect.

In response, Ingram's alternative points to a radically democratic model of human rights, figured as an open-ended right to political participation activated by the rights-claimants themselves. As such, he claims to put concrete struggles at the center of human rights politics. What does this imply in a more concrete fashion? In the last few pages he makes a few suggestions, stating that we should judge the field of human rights as an *emancipatory possibility*, which is not reducible to formal institutions. He also challenges the assumption that rights can simply be imposed, arguing that rights are only secure and effective when they are the creation and possession of their bearers. We should not focus only on whether certain norms are upheld or certain institutions exist, but also on the social and political capacities - the distribution of power - that must underlie them. The lesson of a democratic perspective on human rights is that we should

see them as concerned with people's ability to participate meaningfully on the direction of collective life (262).

Thus, although arguing against bad idealism, Ingram clearly does not want to defend the status quo in the name of 'reality' as has been done by the most conservative, apologetic positions in international affairs, rejecting all ambitions for global reforms. Instead, his approach strives to respond to the world as it is, while still believing in the imperative to change it (269). At this point, Ingram explicitly aligns himself with the tradition of critical theory proposing a 'realism of possibility' - a realism devoted to uncovering and opening up space for the invention of what now appears impossible. However, the question that comes to mind is who is going to uncover these opportunities and subsequently going to fight the obstacles to change? At this point, we are well aware of the paradoxical effects of cosmopolitan practices, in the sense that we know what we should not do: we should refrain from acting on what we think promotes the 'general good' or any of the other formulas that try to sum up a universal interest at the expense of input from agents who are captured in the universal interest.

But as Ingram does not argue in favor of a hands-off approach, we cannot simply put the burden of emancipatory development on the people in the weakest political position, by stating that they have to somehow formulate and defend their interests. Rather, we should do 'whatever is likely to result in and, as much as possible to itself express, the greatest possible gain in freedom and equality among all those concerned.' (272) Although this cannot always be the work of those concerned, Ingram states that we should at least be able to judge it as if it were their work and evaluate the extent to which it will put them in a position to exercise a more equal freedom in the future.

However, to argue that the critical theorist is allowed to position himself in such a way that he can speak and act on other people's behalf stands in tension with Ingram's earlier acknowledgement that claims are only secure and effective when they are the creation and possession of their bearers. What exactly is our role as radical cosmopolitanists who focus on ac-

tual conflict and concrete resistance against exclusion and marginalization? What are the means to support this struggle, which are a possibility for – although not necessary lead to – change towards inclusion and freedom? How should we be involved with the ones concerned with these struggles? Ingram does not say much about this, but stresses that our actions must at least lead to a position of more equal freedom in the future. However, this suggestion might not be sufficient to support his radical project.

First of all, it is not clear how we can know that our actions have indeed established, or will establish, more equal freedom. Although Ingram attempts to formulate normative foundations for his emancipatory project, his notions of freedom and equality, as well as equal freedom, remain rather abstract. Considering his well-argued objection against formulating a universal good once and for all, he should indeed be careful in defining these normative concepts. However, given the obstinate and complex nature of our social reality it cannot be taken for granted that the contestation of specific hegemonic and exclusionary practices lead to *more* freedom, equality etc. Although this contestation aims to open up space for a transformation that now seems impossible, this by itself does not provide normative guidance for evaluating these newly constructed realities.

Secondly, to argue that the commitment to more equal freedom in the future is the condition under which the critical theorist is allowed to be a spokesperson who formulates and defends the interests for the agents involved, puts us back at the heart of the asymmetry problem. As stated by Isaiah Berlin, these emancipatory projects run the risk of making assumptions about what agents would choose if they were something they are not, or at least are not yet, even though this is in contrast to what they actually seek and choose. What should the critical theorist do when his insight about realizing more freedom is not shared by the ordinary agents? In order not to ‘make free with a stick’<sup>3</sup>, we have to take ordinary agents seriously in their self-reflective capacities, when we act as if we were in their position. However, this does not deny the fact that perverse social arrangements do often pose limitations to agents’ self-understanding and prevent them to recognize and resist oppressive or exclusionary practices.

So it is one thing to emphasize the critical potential of cosmopolitanism by stressing its disruptive power, but another to understand how and by whom exclusionary practices can be challenged. Following Ingram’s line of thought, it is evident that these questions cannot be answered in a purely abstract manner. Rather, this is up to the difficult and uncertain judgment in close critical studies of particular circumstances. Ingram does provide some orientation for this critical task by strongly arguing for getting rid of formulating universal truths. My additional suggestion, based on the discussion with regard to the asymmetry problem, would be to stress the problematic nature of the assumption that it is always *the other* who is deluded, or the other who needs to live up to cosmopolitan ideals. This is especially important within the discussion on human rights, where liberal democracies have often (violently) intervened in non-democratic regimes. Ingram hints to this suggestion when he states that cosmopolitanism is not just a matter of installing institutions, but rather a way of realizing social and political capacities. This undermines the absolute normative power of liberal democracies, and values this institutional frame in so far as it contributes to the ability of people inside and outside the borders of the nation-state to participate meaningfully on the direction of collective life (262). This means that we should not only resist being indifferent to struggles for inclusion by people who do not share our citizenship, but we must also scrutinize and challenge our own social arrangements so as to live up to the universalistic aspirations of a truly radical cosmopolitanism. Thus, Ingram’s excellent work provides us with a lot to think about, and indeed also, to act upon.


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<sup>1</sup> Geuss, R. (1981). *The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School*. Cambridge University Press, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Nussbaum, M. (1994) 'Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism.' In: *Boston Review*, 19(5).

<sup>3</sup> Berlin, I. (1958) 'Two Concepts of Liberty.' In: I. Berlin (1969), *Four Essays on Liberty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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