

“THE HUMBLE COSMOPOLITAN:
RIGHTS, DIVERSITY,
AND TRANS-STATE DEMOCRACY”
BY LUIS CABRERA

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Abstract: It is often alleged that debates on cosmopolitanism and global justice are blind towards non-western normative resources. In *The Humble Cosmopolitan: Rights, Diversity, and Trans-state Democracy*, published by the Oxford University Press in 2020, Luis Cabrera responds to such a charge by presenting an account of institutional cosmopolitanism imbued with the norm of political humility. By interpreting Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar’s political vision and the practices inspired by it, Cabrera articulates a theory of institutional cosmopolitanism that not only has an egalitarian slant, but more importantly is imbued with the ideal of political humility.

Keywords: Luis Cabrera, *The Humble Cosmopolitan*, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, institutional cosmopolitanism, political humility.

INTRODUCTION

It is often alleged that debates on cosmopolitanism and global justice are blind towards non-western normative resources. In *The Humble Cosmopolitan: Rights, Diversity, and Trans-state Democracy* published by the Oxford University Press in 2020, Luis Cabrera responds to such a charge by presenting an account of institutional cosmopolitanism imbued with the norm of political humility. By interpreting Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar’s political vision and the practices inspired by it, Cabrera articulates a theory of institutional cosmopolitanism that not only has an egalitarian slant, but more importantly is imbued with the ideal of political humility.

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Cabrera’s account of institutional cosmopolitanism or global democracy is presented as an alternative to the contemporary system of sovereign states, which betrays an arrogance akin to the caste system found in India. Both these systems of power are deemed to be similar because claims (defined as inputs or challenges) arising from subordinate positions within the system or beyond it are usually summarily dismissed. Author’s analysis is divided into two parts: section I develops the theoretical framework, and section II responds to specific objections against cosmopolitanism. Methodologically speaking, the book exemplifies grounded normative theory: normative claims are articulated based on empirical investigations undertaken by the author. I summarise its main arguments in the next section, and submit an overarching assessment of the project in the section thereafter.

A SUMMARY OF THE MAIN ARGUMENTS

The Humble Cosmopolitan develops an account of “institutional cosmopolitanism giving due emphasis to global citizenship – aiming ultimately to provide mechanisms of input, exchange/publicity, and challenge on an equal basis to all persons – will be systematically oriented to political humility” (Cabrera 2020: 9). So, what is political humility? Regarded as a political virtue of standing, political humility refers to the “commitment to the equal standing of others and openness to them, rather than any form of servility, or plain deference in the face of conflicting moral claims emerging from diverse traditions” (Cabrera 2020: 20).

Cabrera formulates it as the conceptual bedrock of the book by informing it with Ambedkarite notions of social endosmosis: “fluid interactions among societal groups”; *maitri*, “a virtue expressing sympathy, amity, and benevolence toward others” (Cabrera 2020: 40-41). It is primarily contrasted with political arrogance, a political vice of standing which “entails a more direct rejection of others’ standing to give input” (Cabrera 2020: 39). Despite the contrast, Cabrera engages both concepts in the following common vein: *a*) they are

“conceptualised as a virtue and vice of standing”; *b*) they are defined “by their collective nature and relationship to political institutions” (Cabrera 2020: 38).

Political arrogance exists both along the vertical and the horizontal axes. Along the vertical-axis it manifests in the routine rejection of “input about rights violations” presented by supra-state institutions on the grounds of “sovereign privileges” possessed by states “in their ascribed roles as rights guarantors” (Cabrera 2020: 135-136). Along the horizontal axis, it can be diagnosed in “the summary dismissal of claims by outsiders for broader distribution of resources, opportunities and protections – for example, by would be immigrants and asylum seekers” (Cabrera 2020: 137). Besides, political arrogance gets buttressed by political vices like apathy and selfishness.

But, why should political humility be affirmed? Political humility should be affirmed because it entails embracing the “high equal status for persons” grounded in “the concept of dignity” within socio-political institutions (Cabrera 2020: 50). It also serves as an antithesis to political arrogance. Cabrera provides both practical and theoretical justifications for the same, with the latter being further sub-divided into doctrinal and non-doctrinal arguments respectively.

Practical justifications include promoting the overall interest of society defined as total benefit of its members and surmounting the practical challenges of classifying populations. Doctrinal-theoretical justifications comprise *a*) Ambedkar’s interpretation of Buddhist ethics to offer a “blending of consequentialist and epistemic reasons for accepting equal social status and correcting for some social disadvantage” (Cabrera 2020: 48); *b*) Ambedkar’s rendering of the Hindu concept of “Brahmanism” and its core principles found in the Upanishads (a collection of later-Vedic texts).

Non-doctrinal theoretical justification uses discriminatory social practices to underscore the imperative of equality. Ambedkar conceptually differentiated between capacities of human and non-human animals to show that *Dalits* (underprivileged subordinate caste groups in India) were held beneath animals in the social hierarchy. Hence, their well-being was not a social concern and were prevented from using or



improving “their capacities” (Cabrera 2020: 54). Thus, if political humility is about high equal worth of persons, how can it be promoted?

Cabrera initially responds to the question in a theoretical manner. He recommends an instrumental rights-based approach to promote political humility, which can serve as an effective counter to political arrogance. To this end, he interprets the Ambedkarite notion of the soul of democracy (the doctrine of one man, one value) to stress on the enhancement and protection of peoples’ rights by concentrating upon “mechanisms of input, exchange and challenge” (Cabrera 2020: 79). Such features, it is argued, orients a system towards political humility.

Input and exchange mechanisms encompass “civil and political rights relating to regular, competitive and fair elections and freedom of speech, media, association and peaceful protest” (Cabrera 2020: 79). Mechanisms of challenge comprise “formal legal challenges, petitions to national human rights commissions and/or ombuds offices, some direct access to representatives, and possibly some referendum provisions” (Cabrera 2020: 80). The author prefers an instrumental approach over its intrinsic counterpart because the instrumental approach by providing the above-stated mechanisms better addresses the problem of persistent electoral losers.

Thereafter, practical ways in which political humility and protection of rights can be promoted are explored. The activities of the National Campaign of Dalit Human Rights (hereafter NCDHR) both within India and beyond is analysed to illustrate “the importance” of democratic institutions “and other mechanisms of suprastate inputs and challenge” in countering “political arrogance” inherent to the prevailing sovereign state system (Cabrera 2020: 91).

Cabrera specifically cites the NCDHR’s efforts to move the United Nation’s human rights regime so that caste atrocities and discrimination are recognised as violation of human rights. Such campaigns, he argues, could provide modular forms for developing practices of institutional cosmopolitan citizenship. The NCDHR case is used to embellish claims “for developing new institutions such as a proposed World Court



of Human Rights within the UN system” (Cabrera 2020: 156). The European Court of Human Rights and the MERCOSUR are cited among other examples as having instructive value for realising institutional cosmopolitanism in practice.

Moreover, positive and negative duties of global citizenship concerned with “suprastate institutions” are explicated as well (Cabrera 2020: 146). Such duties are deemed to equip “individuals to better challenge political arrogance and related vices” (Cabrera 2020: 146). They also help develop, and reform “regional and global institutions”, thereby enhancing their democratic accountability and cosmopolitan character (Cabrera 2020: 160).

Following which, Cabrera addresses critiques of cosmopolitanism raised by fellow theorists: Martha Nussbaum, Simon Caney, and practitioners of politics: conservative political parties from India and the United Kingdom respectively. With regard to India, Cabrera engages objections raised by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and in the case of the UK, that of the UK Independence Party (UKIP).

For Nussbaum, institutional cosmopolitanism extends very little moral significance to particular, intimate attachments, and does not respect collective autonomy and choice within the domestic sphere of states. Cabrera responds by arguing that compared to statist-alternatives, institutional cosmopolitanism can better address concerns “for special duties to intimates” (Cabrera 2020: 167). Further, Cabrera argues that institutional cosmopolitanism can also check statist tendencies to muzzle autonomy and choice within its domestic sphere.

Simon Caney argues that since “reasonable disagreement” exists among people, an account of cosmopolitan democracy should not prescribe “global rights guarantees” beyond a threshold because anything beyond would be tantamount to “political arrogance” (Cabrera 2020: 167). In response, Cabrera argues that institutional cosmopolitanism being committed to political humility cannot stop at a minimum threshold and must strive to realise “key aspirational rights and the expansion of opportunities over time for those facing deprivation,



exclusion, and steep inequalities in the current system” (Cabrera 2020: 168).

By situating the BJP within its ideological framework of *Hindutva*, Cabrera captures its criticism of the NCDHR’s activities. He shows how cosmopolitanism is viewed as a form of neo-imperial overture. According to the BJP, cosmopolitanism is not a universal ethic as it is claimed to be by its proponents. It is a western imposition “arrogant in treating adherents of non-universal, non-liberal views as not qualified to act as equal moral claims makers” (Cabrera 2020: 218). Cabrera rebuts such charges by arguing that contesting and challenging claims are central features of “an institutional global citizenship approach” (Cabrera 2020: 225). Hence, it is well poised to “support meaningful dialogue on parochialism and neo-imperialism claims offered by critics of cosmopolitanism itself” (Cabrera 2020: 225).

The UKIP’s argument is of a different variant: cosmopolitanism is arrogant because it dismisses claims of national self-determination. Articulated with respect to the European Union, their first objection is “that suprapstate democratic institutions inappropriately treat national communities as not authorized to set policy priorities in line with their own distinctive national priorities” (Cabrera 2020: 237).

A related objection states “that the EU presumptuously imposes a more cosmopolitan vision of democracy” (Cabrera 2020: 237). The EU, like enterprises of suprapstate democracy, expects its members to partake in shared living with culturally distinct people. Such prospects engender claims of cultural uniqueness against cosmopolitanism. The latter objection becomes meaningful when a Muslim majority nation-state like Turkey is seen to be on the verge of joining the EU project, thereby smoothing the migration of Turks into the UK. In sum, the UKIP’s position is more in favour of national self-determination than cosmopolitan sharing.

Cabrera refutes such charges by illuminating how contemporary nation-states are not homogenous entities. Furthermore, nationalist sentiments and national unity are not automatically produced. Governments make a lot of investment in order to create and sustain such feelings. Moreover, a blind

pursuit of national self-determination in a globally interconnected world such as the present one could potentially harm other nation-states.

AN ASSESSMENT

In this section, I will present an appraisal of the work from a specific hermeneutical vantage point. My focus will be on Cabrera's approach to institutional cosmopolitanism or global democracy, and his treatment of non-western (specifically Indian) normative resources. The instrumental approach seeks to promote and protect individual rights and interests by providing for institutional mechanisms tempered by the norm of political humility at the regional and global levels, beyond the state. They are meant to serve as platforms for input, exchange and challenge articulated by citizens of the world.

However, Cabrera's rendering does not make it clear as to why decisions taken at these regional and global level institutions would be abided by people. This "why" question is important because the author specifically characterises political humility to be a collective institutional feature rather than that of an individuated, personal kind. To put it more simply: why should individual citizens who are not motivated to embrace the ideal of political humility in their own conduct be willing to abide by decisions taken by supranational cosmopolitan institutions? To this effect, Cabrera should have equally stressed that political humility has to be also realised in the individual. Taking Ambedkar's cue, the fate of any institution ultimately lies in the hands of "those who are called to work it" (Ambedkar 1949, in Guha 2010):

Because I feel, however good a Constitution may be, it is sure to turn out bad because those who are called to work it, happen to be a bad lot. However bad a Constitution may be, it may turn out to be good if those who are called to work it, happen to be a good lot (Ambedkar 1949, in Guha 2010).

Such a challenge leads us to the next logical aspect of Cabrera's approach: the author does not explicate how cosmopolitan institutions would arrive at decisions or how they would be enforced in practice save for the fact that the process has to be participatory and deliberative. Thus, when the "why" and "how" challenges are juxtaposed with each other, we come face to face with the question of political legitimacy. What grants political legitimacy to institutions of global cosmopolitanism? Is it simply the appeal to political humility? Or is it grounded in an account of global political liberalism?

If it is the normative appeal to political humility interpreted on Ambedkarite terms, Cabrera appears to run a risky venture. For example, he highlights how Ambedkar grounded it in the principles of "Brahmanism", a characteristic feature of Hinduism. This is done to show that even non-western values champion universal standards. The analysis appears to suggest that political humility is in itself a feature of global political liberalism.

But, why do I suggest that such a proposition is risky? It is because Cabrera does not develop any objective criterion for mining civilizational resources to be used for designing institutions of global democracy. Neither does he prescribe any method other than deliberation to harmonise claims generated by competing normative ideals culled out from different cultures. Without any objective criterion and a clear method, deliberation would remain perpetually open-ended.

Moreover, why should political humility interpreted by Ambedkar as social endosmosis and *maitri* be embraced by people coming from different cultural backgrounds not familiar with Hindu resources? We do not need to invoke Thomas Hobbes to remind ourselves that we are essentially selfish creatures. The past decade, and particularly the ongoing pandemic, has starkly bared our self-centred selves. Hence, it could be argued that people are not predisposed to be accommodative of others' moral worldviews.

Conversely, someone who is familiar could object to the universalisation of such values pointing to their limited success within their home context (in this case India). Sunil Khilnani's remarks prove to be instructive, "it's one of the profound iron-

nies of India's democracy: reservations, designed to erode caste identities and fortify individual citizens, have invigorated caste categories now defined by the state" (Khilnani 2016: 342)¹. It has proliferated the politics of vote-banks, which has in turn hardened the arrogance of the privileged castes against the underprivileged.

Additionally, despite constitutional guarantees of rights meant to safeguard the inviolability of people born into underprivileged caste groups, and affirmative action policies meant to unlock their potential, the arrogance of the caste system is manifested in the way in which members of underprivileged caste groups are violently treated in an almost routine manner. The recent rape of a nineteen-year-old Dalit woman in Hathras, Uttar Pradesh is emblematic of that pathology (Pandey 2020).

Cabrera could counter the aforementioned charge, by arguing that the pathology of the Indian situation does not represent a lack of potential in Ambedkarite norms, but their limited realisation in practice. Ambedkar himself was prescient about such a possibility: a solely top-down approach to institutionalising norms like equality, justice cannot guarantee desired outcomes. "Democracy in India is only a top-dressing on an Indian soil, which is essentially undemocratic" (Ambedkar 1948, in Guha 2010). That soil was also scarred by severe socioeconomic inequality.

"How long shall we continue to deny equality in our social and economic life? If we continue to deny it for long, we will do so only by putting our political democracy in peril" (Ambedkar 1949, in Guha 2010). Global socioeconomic inequality is even more acute, yet Cabrera still chooses to wield a top-down approach. That being the case, the prospects of his framework of institutional cosmopolitanism instilled with political humility will ultimately depend upon how well it pays attention to Ambedkar's strong caveat.

Nevertheless, *The Humble Cosmopolitan* is an ambitious project. Cabrera's arguments do not lose any of their force despite being articulated in a lucid manner. It extends the terrain of contemporary political theory, and does so by demonstrating to its students the various ways in which it can be done. To

this end, I feel the fifth chapter of the book should henceforth be mandated as compulsory reading in political theory courses. On a related note, Cabrera's exposition of the case-studies located in India, United Kingdom and Turkey are highly visual accounts, showcasing to the reader his earlier identity of a professional journalist.

Luis Cabrera breaks new ground with his latest offering: it not only paints a portrait of the humble cosmopolitan exemplified by Bhimrao Ambedkar; a future possible world configured by institutional cosmopolitanism; but also exhorts practitioners of political theory to become humble in their pursuits by being more cognizant of the possibilities presented by non-western normative worldviews. This triadic lesson proves to be all the more salient for those working on global justice. *The Humble Cosmopolitan* will not only be useful for scholars of political theory, but also for policymakers engaged in reforming our regional and global institutions. It even offers some rays of hope to the general reader looking to overcome the present doom and gloom.

NOTES

¹ Ambedkar-led struggles against the caste system precipitated into constitutional backing of affirmative action policies in the form of reservation of seats in parliament and state assemblies as well as in matters of employment in public services and education.

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