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Abstract

A review of:

Global Ethics and Civil Society edited by John Eade and Darren J. O'Byrne. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005. 180pp.

Keywords

Human rights, Global society, Globalization

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Liberal political theorists have devoted considerable energy in recent years to exploring the ethics of an emergent global society. Yet there remains little consensus on the origins, extent, and nature of this society; on whether its development is a positive one; and on how progressive political thinkers and actors should respond. One perspective that provides a relatively coherent set of answers is cosmopolitanism, or more specifically, a resurgent form of liberal cosmopolitanism developed by theorists such as Charles Beitz, David Held and Richard Falk, all of whom seek progressive responses to globalization. One of the central theses of this perspective is that a global civil society is emerging and, given the traditional function of civil societies within nation-states, its development at the supranational level is necessarily good. Exploring and questioning this claim is the purpose of this collection, in which a large number of scholars working on related issues comment explicitly on the cosmopolitan approach to global civil society and global ethics.

The introduction notes the editors’ acceptance of the cosmopolitan account of both civil society and globalization and, from the outset, Eade and O’Byrne state their intention of being sympathetic to this project. The contours of the inquiry are drawn with reference to three criticisms of cosmopolitanism. The first is its utilization of a simplistic global/national dichotomy, or its assumption that cosmopolitanism is progressive simply because it rejects nationalism in any form. The second is cosmopolitanism’s uncritical incorporation of a diverse range of new social movements into the cosmopolitan project. Third is its reification of a monolithic, global capitalist economy. Essentially, the aim of the volume is to examine whether global civil society operates the way cosmopolitans theorize it, in order to evaluate the potential success of objectives such as the development of a meaningful global human rights regime.

In parts, the book succeeds in this objective. Bhikhu Parekh’s opening chapter on the relationship between global ethics and multiculturalism is not original, but nevertheless provides vital insights into the operation of civil society in practice. Given that many cosmopolitan theorists outside Britain may be unfamiliar with Parekh’s work, its inclusion here is extremely welcome. Unfortunately, the remainder of the first half of the collection strays too far from the framework outlined in the introduction. Chapters on subjects such as the role of emotion and humanism in liberal theory, the utilitarian alternative to rights-based political projects, and the problems with universalist ethics are all, in themselves, interesting. Yet while each engages with cosmopolitan theory, they fail to assess the real-world dynamics within which cosmopolitanism and any alternative approaches must operate—which is central to Parekh’s chapter.

The chapters in the collection’s second half each claim to be explicitly based on empirical research, and therefore conform more strictly to the stated aims of the introduction. The strongest chapter is development theorist Ray Kiely’s “Global Civil Society and Spaces of Resistance.” This is slightly unfortunate given that Kiely, as a neo-Marxist, is not overtly sympathetic to cosmopolitanism in its liberal form. Nevertheless, Kiely’s discussion of a wide range of political activity at various levels of political organisation provides valuable insights into exactly how the progressive potential of cosmopolitanism may be realised, as well as the theoretical obstacles that are currently hampering the cosmopolitan project, such as its neglect of local acts of resistance to globalization. Paul Kennedy’s chapter on the friendship system of transnational

networks is similarly insightful on the actual state of cosmopolitanism, but within a very narrow frame of reference.

Strangely, the collection includes two chapters on corporate social responsibility, which cover almost identical ground (albeit on the basis of different sets of empirical research). Both argue for the need to define transnational corporations as a part of global civil society. Neither chapter is particularly original, and, while it is an interesting perspective nonetheless, it is not clear why both are included. It is also possible that the form of civil society advocated contravenes the definition provided in the introduction—at least, the role of economic actors in civil society is a tension that goes unaddressed.

Essentially, the book has many interesting bits of scholarship, but is too incoherent to succeed as a collection, especially given the ambitions lucidly sketched in the introduction. Too few of its chapters fit the bill. Tellingly, the editors provide no real conclusion to the book. John Eade offers some brief “concluding remarks,” based exclusively on his own research into immigration, while making virtually no reference to the preceding discussions. Despite this, the book does offer some useful contributions to the debate on cosmopolitanism and global civil society. A familiarity with the resurgent liberal cosmopolitan perspective is required if the book’s value is to be fully appreciated. Nevertheless, it perhaps is ideally suited for students seeking an introduction to a wider range of liberal responses to globalization than is currently offered by the literature on cosmopolitanism.

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