**We are citizens of the world?**

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Introduction

‘World citizenship’ is still utopian, but it is no longer in the realm of science fiction or of idealist political theory. Today it seems to be directly related to quite practical questions of development. The idea of ‘world citizenship’ moves the whole debate about development from thinking in terms of charity to thinking in terms of justice. For ‘world citizens’, life-sapping poverty, appalling working and living conditions, and lack of hope for the future that is the experience of many people around the world becomes a matter of rights and responsibilities. The responsibility is ours: how do ‘we’ in over-developed states contribute in practice to securing human rights that really make a difference to people in other countries? Put like this, it may sound as if ‘rights’ is just a complication – it comes between ‘us’ – the comfortably off in rich countries - and ‘them’- the really poor in other countries. And it may even seem paternalist and disempowering: ‘we’ secure ‘their’ rights. Certainly, realizing human rights in practice is far from a simple matter. But what I think is implied in ‘world citizenship’ at the very least is that we have obligations to others as well as rights. Rights and responsibilities are two sides of the same coin in structures of global interdependence. It is in this sense that ‘world citizenship’ is close today – perhaps emerging already.

What I want to talk about first of all are the realities that condition our idea of ‘world citizenship’ in practice. What is it about the changes we’ve seen in recent years that now makes us think quite seriously that being a global citizen is somehow plausible, even possible in the relatively near future? Indeed, for human rights activists, it’s just around the corner. ‘The world’ for them is already a relatively unified political space, and the idea of ‘world citizenship’ as involving human rights and obligations that are realisable, practical ideals, has a resonance for many that it didn’t have until quite recently. In this respect I will talk about two main types of practices that seem to encourage imagining ourselves as ‘world citizens’. Firstly, our experience of global digital media, which is making changes to our daily experience of being part of humanity. Secondly, structures of human rights which make less direct impression on most of us, but which nevertheless embed us in obligations to people in other countries through our national citizenship. In an era of global digital media in which it is very difficult to avoid knowing about details of ‘distant suffering’, combined with the structures of rights and obligations that are remaking national states, the very idea of ‘human rights’ carries with it implications about how the world works, and what justice means, that make the responsibilities of citizens in over-developed countries more pressing than ever before.

Who are our fellows?

In terms of ‘world citizenship’ the most important question is ‘who are our fellows’? With whom do we belong, and how? This question has two main dimensions, both of which have a long history. As a political ideal (rather than a moral imperative, which is much older), human rights go back to the great revolutions of the C18th – the American, the French, and the less well-known Haitian Revolution that was fought to free the slaves of that island. But who can actually count as human has been much more contested. Consider, for example, that slaves were not human either for the American or the French Revolutionaries. Slaves had to win their humanity – the Haitian Revolution was only briefly and locally successful in doing so. Winning rights to basic freedom took a lot longer and involved art, literature, music and images, as well as changes in politics and law.

So ‘humanity’ has to be fought for – who counts as a fellow human being. But so too does ‘fellowship’ itself. Fellowship implies solidarity; it involves more than just tolerance, living alongside each other as fellow human beings. It’s a question of solidarity rather than tolerance in the sense that we share a sense of common conditions, common hopes, fears, opportunities, threats. Fellows are those with whom we share what is sometimes thought of as a ‘community of fate’.

Since human rights became a political ideal, ‘fellowship’ has been structured nationally. National citizenship is the direct legacy of universal human rights. Who has human rights in the French Declaration of the Rights of Man? It is French citizens. The Declaration goes from ‘men’ (who are ‘born and remain free and equal in rights’) to ‘citizen’ in just the first three Articles. Article 1. ‘ Men are born and remain free and equal in rights.’ Article 3. ‘The principle of all sovereignty resides essentially in the nation. No body nor individual may exercise any authority which does not proceed directly from the nation.’

National citizenship is how the modern ‘community of fate’ is organised. Again, of course, in many cases this has had to be fought for – as the long struggles against imperialism in the C19th and C20th demonstrate. Nevertheless, the ideal of sharing a community of fate with our fellow nationals has to some extent been realised in the twentieth century – certainly in Europe, North America and Australasia; less clearly elsewhere. Most importantly, of course, it is the ‘nation’ that is supposed to govern itself through its own sovereign state – but this has also entailed the construction of a ‘national economy’ (through statistics on trade and manufacturing, national debt etc), policies oriented towards the well-being of the population understood as territorially bounded, the expectation of a common language amongst citizens and so on. And this community of fate is also an imagined nation: commonality is created through symbols and practices that represent ‘us’ as belonging together (Anderson 1991). This ‘imagined nation’ is not only a product of extreme patriotism, with hatred of foreigners, war and violence. On the contrary, as Michael Billig has argued very carefully and convincingly, most nationalism is ‘banal’ (Billig 1995). Banal nationalism involves everyday ‘flagging’ of the nation – it’s completely naturalised, and we’re barely aware of it. My favourite example is the weather map. Banal nationalism is still very much with us. We have only to consider an example that is somewhat ‘hotter’ form than the weather map, the interest in names and faces of fellow nationals over all others in media coverage of accidents or disasters. For example, coverage of the tsunami on the BBC and in British newspapers was to a large extent organised around the names and faces of British people who’d been affected by it. This is taken to extremes during times of war – when nationalism of course becomes also more than banal. For example, when British soldiers are killed in Iraq and Afghanistan, their names and faces appear as news; the killing of civilians in these wars is marked rather by the names of places: Kandahar, Helmund Province, Basra.

But ‘banal nationalism’ is now accompanied to some extent by ‘banal cosmopolitanism’ (Hannerz 1999; Beck 2002; Szerszynski and Urry 2002). Cultural referents to the ‘global’ and the non-national are as frequent now as flags and weather maps – in everything from food to pop videos and advertising, through literature, and not forgetting the frequency with which we’re shown the very form of the globe itself to stand in for everyone in the world as well as for planet Earth (something which, as a photographic image has only become possible in the last 50 years).

Most important from our point of view, however, and the remarkable interest we take in the names and faces of our fellow nationals notwithstanding, is the range and frequency of images and stories we now receive directly transmitted into our homes about what Luc Boltanski calls ‘distant suffering’ (Boltanski 1999). ‘Distant suffering’ is not necessarily the suffering of foreigners. What is distant about it is that it is mediated – the person who is suffering is not physically present; we have knowledge of them only through the images and stories of the media. Nevertheless, according to Boltanski, such images do require action from us – just as they would if the person were actually present. He suggests that feeling that we can do something is part of ‘the spectatorship of suffering’. In fact, as long as we look we are acting – and if we turn away, or turn off, that is acting too. We are bound to act then when confronted with images of distant suffering. Boltanski shows that there are a number of different kinds of responses, not all of them directed towards alleviating suffering. He deconstructs what is involved in different models of response to distant suffering. One of the models stands out as most relevant to ‘world citizenship’.

What kind of response to media images and stories of ‘distant suffering’ is appropriate to ‘world citizenship’? What kind of response is appropriate to a world in which we share a community of fate with fellow human beings as such? Rather than exclusively with our fellow nationals. How might suffering be made a matter of justice rather than of charity? Boltanski suggests that pity is not such a bad start in such instances – but that it is not enough. Against Hannah Arendt who sees pity only as putting a distance between oneself and those who suffer, Boltanski sees pity as a starting point for various different forms of response – the political, the sentimental, and the aesthetic. He argues that there are many different ways in which feeling pity for those who are suffering can develop. If pity is to develop in a way that motivates claims for justice, he suggests, the appropriate emotional response to such images and stories is indignation. And what is appropriate in terms of action is denunciation – of those responsible for the situation. It is through feelings of indignation and attributing responsibility that feelings of pity can feed a politics of justice.

This seems intuitively right. Consider the response when fellow nationals suffer - it is the government that is responsible. In cases of humanitarian crisis, our government must ensure that if our fellow citizens are caught up in revolutions or wars, or natural disasters, that they are airlifted to safety, that they are given medical supplies, and whatever is needed to help them cope. It’s not guilt and shame that we feel – we don’t turn away overwhelmed by our inability to do anything. On the contrary, we’re energised with indignation if nothing is done. Consider, for example, the outrage at the lack of the US government’s response to the disaster of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. Justice and our fellow feeling requires that something should be done. But what if our fellow feeling leads us to indignation over the plight of people whose suffering we see and pity, but who are not fellow nationals? Where then can we direct our indignation? Who can we denounce as responsible?

According to Boltanski, indignation and denunciation invariably imply a theory of power. That puts causality in the picture. That is to say, indignation and denunciation imply not just an identifiable agent who is responsible for the suffering but also connections between their actions, or lack of actions, and the suffering that is caused. Such a theory need not be enormously elaborate – we’re not necessarily talking about fully worked out theories of the kind that fill books. They can be more schematic, and they’re often quite taken-for-granted. Indeed, to be really effective, theories of power need to become common sense rather than academic. What kind of theory of power is implied in ‘world citizenship’ as it is developing through human rights?

What are our rights?

According to human rights activists – we are world citizens already. As individual human beings we have rights and we also have legal and political obligations. Preventing and dealing with distant suffering is not just a matter of a charitable response to people who are in difficulties at a particular moment. We’re already global citizens – albeit imperfectly. Not that we participate in one common public sphere; and this is, of course, no world government. But there are common structures of rights in international law.

### Civil and political rights are most important in then UN system. And mostly what we hear about in the North. Here we often think of them as basic or fundamental. These are the first 12 Articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the basis of the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights. They include rights to life and liberty, fair trial, freedom of movement, to association and expression, to property, and to participation in choosing the government.

Social, economic and cultural are also well established in international law – in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the International Convention on Social, Cultural and Economic Rights. They are as detailed and extensive as civil and political rights, though much more highly contested, and resisted, especially by Northern states. They include the right to fair wages and working conditions, social security and social assistance, adequate food, clothing and housing, education and healthcare.

But what are human rights beyond declarations and fine sounding words? How are human rights secured? Who is responsible for making sure that human rights really exist? If asked this question I guess that most people would say ‘the United Nations’ or perhaps ‘the European Court of Human Rights’ or ‘the European Union’. To some extent this is right: Inter-Governmental Organisations are crucial to ensuring human rights in practice. At this level, the procedures and means by which human rights might be realised are extremely complex, and seem very distant to most of us. But in another way the answer to the question is much more simple and closer to home: in international human rights law it is overwhelmingly states that are responsible for human rights.

Far from becoming redundant, abolished or sidelined by international human rights law, it is only through states that human rights make sense. It’s in the name of states that international agreements are signed. It’s states that are bound by these agreements: they create obligations for their own future actions. On the other hand, of course, states are the chief violators of human rights. In legal terms, and in reality. It is regimes that have access to state resources of money and force, as well as legitimacy, that abuse human rights: in terms of civil rights, they imprisoning without charge, torture, kidnap and kill; in terms of political rights they rig elections and beat up opponents; they persecute people on the basis of skin colour and ethnicity, refusing to recognise alternative ways of life; and in terms of socio-economic rights they misuse state resources for political ends or simply to enrich themselves and their supporters. Human rights were ‘designed’ with just such violations in mind – the violations committed through and by states.

So here is the responsibility for suffering that is implied in discourses of human rights: it is states that are responsible for guaranteeing human rights. But which states? And which responsibilities?

Let’s consider socio-economic rights. Arguably what’s most important for most people in the world who lack security of food and shelter, healthcare, the possibility of seeing their children educated and growing up with what they need. They are linked to civil and political rights – human rights are often said to indivisible: civil and political rights create accountability for government budgets, distribution of public goods (like health care and education), investment and the regulation of business are all essential for social and economic development.

The point here is that globalization means that states, which are responsible for socio-economic rights, are no longer quite the national states they once were. Saskia Sassen argues that states are ‘denationalizing’ (Sassen 2006). What she means by this is relatively simple. She’s arguing that much of what we associate with globalization has been created by states. It’s not, as politicians would have us believe, that globalization is happening in spite of states, or by eroding their power. It’s happening through states, because of what government officials and bureaucrats are putting in place in terms of regulation (which we often think of as de-regulation) of financial markets, trade and labour conditions. It is as a result of states’ orientations towards global agendas and systems, and a turning away from constructions of ‘national economy’ that globalization is possible.

Sassen is most concerned with the construction of global capitalism and with its effect on democracy and the workers’ movement. She sees the denationalizing of states as benefiting global neo-liberalism. But what then of human rights in denationalizing states? Do states, in orienting themselves towards global agendas and systems then become more subject to constraint in terms of human rights? Do human rights begin to supplement or even to replace citizens’ rights as what makes it possible to tame capitalism for the benefit of ordinary people?

The short answer here is ‘no’. For the most part governments around the world negotiate the global harmonization of terms of business and the regulation of markets at the international level undisturbed by considerations of their impact on human rights and the kinds of conditions they produce for poor people in other countries. And yet, social and economic rights, which most states have accepted (with the glaring exception of the US) in signing and ratifying the ICESCR, committed them to, in the words of Articles 2 and 3: ‘take steps, individually and through international assistance and co-operation… to the maximum of its available resources, with a view to achieving progressively the full realization of [all economic, social and cultural rights]’. In other words they have committed governments to doing their utmost to ensure the socio-economic rights of people both in their own countries, but also in others.

Of course, this is not what we see in reality. Even where states have signed up to human rights agreements, then, there is actually no universal framework of rights as such. Human rights are at best universalising – as Willem van Genugten pointed out in his talk earlier in this series – and it’s better to understand them in this way rather than as already existing as universals. But what such agreements do enable, potentially, is mobilisation to bring states to account for the international human rights agreements that are apparently a global consensus.

So to recap, then, the argument so far: images of distant suffering require a certain emotional response and a certain action. Where they invoke pity, to become part of a politics of justice appropriate to world citizens they must involve indignation and denunciation of those responsible. And it seems that human rights agreements have built in a rudimentary theory of who is responsible: it is states. And not just the state of which the people who are suffering are citizens. But all states. Including our own. It is in this sense that we are already world citizens: it is states, our own and others, that must be denounced as the causes of distant suffering.

From national into world citizens?

But if states are denationalizing in that government agents are increasingly oriented towards global agendas and systems, it is also the case that they remain banally national. It is, however, these people, who appear regularly on British TV and media, who are responsible for government. Even where media is owned and managed by global conglomerates, it continues to orient its readers to a large extent through banal nationalism.

Human rights and nationalism aren’t necessarily opposed. Nationalism is of course mobilised in conservative or reactionary forms against the realization of human rights – whether it’s a matter of national security, or ‘bail outs’ to heavily indebted countries. But it may also be mobilised to support them. Let’s consider a case I’ve studied in detail, that of Make Poverty History in the UK (known as ‘Maak Het Waar’ in the Netherlands) (Nash 2009). It was part of a campaign in 2005 that united 100s of NGOs through the Global Call for Action Against Poverty, organised around the slogan ‘Think globally, act nationally’. It continues today – campaigning, for example on the so-called ‘Robin Hood’ or ‘Tobin Tax’.

In the Make Poverty History campaign in the UK 2005, nationalism worked quite differently, for the realisation of socio-economic rights to alleviate ‘distant suffering’. Make Poverty History was an unprecedented media event, over several months, involving everyone from pop stars and celebrities to students and school children. It became a national obsession – in a way that may be peculiarly British, with our populist media. Whole days of BBC coverage was given over to it, and every single newspaper took up the theme. Of course, there are many criticisms that can be made of the campaign itself. It called for fair not free trade, demanding that ‘odious’ debt should be dropped for all those countries that had incurred it, and increasing aid. I don’t want to get into what would be necessary in terms of radical restructuring of global governance for poverty to be really become history. What I do want to talk about is the cultural, emotional and political terms of the campaign.

On the one hand MPH was a very important phenomenon from which I think we have to learn. I think it was unprecedented, possibly unique, but perhaps it may be indicative of a new sensibility. Or at least new possibilities. It involved citizens in Northern states (not just in Britain but nowhere else was it so widespread) coming together to denounce authorities that were not prepared to do what they could to alleviate the suffering of non-citizens in far off countries. To express indignation, not pity, for distant suffering; to denounce governments, their own and others (especially the US); and to demand justice, not charity, for people with whom they do not share a national bond or a common government.

On the other hand, the denunciation was largely framed in terms of what I have called ‘cosmopolitan nationalism’. The framework was ‘cosmopolitan’ because it was oriented towards politics through the state but for people outside the nation. It was ‘nationalist’ in that it enabled the celebration of the nation as superior, as benevolent, caring, the saviour of the poor and mistreated. This is a construction that is highly problematic not least because it is rather prone to be self-satisfied: the gesture towards caring becomes a celebration of oneself, one’s own sensitivity, enjoyment of one’s own indignation. It became sentimental and narcissistic, and tended then to silence those who were ‘to be helped’ except insofar as they joined in the celebration of the nation’s benevolence. This is hardly a basis for dialogue or a way of building democratic exchanges amongst ‘world citizens’.

In conclusion then – how are we world citizens and what are the limits of that citizenship? We are ‘world citizens’ in that we are responding on a daily basis now to images and stories of suffering elsewhere in the world. We may, we often do, turn away. We are world citizens in that we have political obligations to those people, albeit indirectly, through the states of which we are nationals insofar as they have signed up to international human rights agreements. A more direct obligation, we might say, is to denounce the authorities when they do not live up to those agreements. In this respect, world citizenship is exercised as national citizenship. Of course, for the most part, most people are unaware of such obligations, and they might well disagree that they implicate them at all. It is for this reason that there is still much to be done to frame issues of global poverty as matters of justice not charity; to elicit responses of indignation (rather than guilt, shame or indifference); and to encourage denunciation of authorities that do not keep their promises. And if this seems impossibly utopian, we should consider that it is also necessary.

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