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What is Orientation in Thinking? On the Question of Time and Timeliness in Cosmopolitical Thought¹

Abstract

This paper examines Kant's 'orientation' for political thought and the way in which it sets up a normative temporal hierarchy between different peoples and different histories. It examines the question of whether and 'orientation without orientalism' within cosmopolitical theory is possible through a contrast between Habermas's cosmopolitanism and Connolly's immanent naturalism. It concludes that it is only when cosmopolitical thought becomes heterotemporally oriented that the aspiration to cosmopolitan scope for ethical and political claims will be met.

Introduction

- - other cultures do not initially confront us as alien societies, since their structures remind us of previous phases of our own social development.²

Habermas makes the above comment in a discussion about the different points of view from which western culture encounters its others and vice versa in the contemporary world. Whereas non-western cultures experience the west as an overarching global power, a threatening future, western culture experiences the non-west as a reminder of its own past. The idea of non-simultaneity in the encounter between west and non-west is a common point of view, one that has become deeply ingrained in much of western thought.³ Moreover, it is frequently enmeshed with a different claim. As Barry Hindess points out there are two characteristic tendencies in

western social and political thought: one is the tendency to assign (non-western) contemporaries to the world of the past; the other is the tendency to consign those belonging to the past to the realm of moral and intellectual failure.⁴ This paper argues that these twin tendencies are embedded in the response to the problem of ‘orientation’ in thought first posed and answered by Kant in a way that has continued to shape contemporary cosmopolitical thinking. This is the problem of the impossibility of perspectiveless thinking faced by the political philosopher committed to the moral law. The paper goes on to argue that as long as a Kantian solution to the problem of orientation in thought holds sway in contemporary cosmopolitical theories then such theories will fail to achieve the cosmopolitical reach to which they aspire. The progressive impact and timeliness of such attempts to address issues of global rights and justice are undermined by a presumed, but rarely acknowledged, asymmetrical structure in the ethico-political relation between political theorists of cosmopolitan rights and justice and the majority of the global audience to whom, or on behalf of whom, their arguments are, directly or indirectly, addressed.

In what follows, I examine the link between the two tendencies identified by Hindess, that is to say, the link between understandings of socio-political time and normative, prescriptive claims. My interest is in political theories that seek to address normative cosmopolitical questions about universal human rights, humanitarian intervention, global distributive justice and cosmopolitan democracy.⁵ My aim is to establish how it might be possible for political theory to be *orientated* in relation to the cosmopolitical present(s), without the *orientalism* targeted in Hindess’s analysis.⁶

I begin with a return to Kant, who poses and resolves the problem of orientation in thinking in a way that has been particularly influential on later theorizations of world politics. I will argue that Kant’s claim as to the necessity of

orientation in thinking speaks to the impossibility of judgement from nowhere, at the same time as it dissimulates this impossibility. It accomplishes this through a posited connection between Kant's home in thought (enlightenment Europe) and an 'as if' end of history. This entanglement of temporal and normative assumptions makes *timely* judgment in Kant's political theory possible. This is the kind of judgment that aims to make a (normatively) positive difference to the world, by contributing to the progressive tendencies of the present. It is this kind of judgment that is at stake in most contemporary scholarship concerned with normative cosmopolitical questions.

In the second and third sections of the article, I move on to examine two contemporary cosmopolitical theorists with progressive political agendas, Habermas and Connolly. These two thinkers present very different views about the orientation for thinking the world-political present(s). Whereas Habermas's thought remains orientated by a strongly Kantian view of political time, Connolly explicitly rejects this view and articulates an alternative pluralized understanding of political time. I will argue that the timely judgment enabled by Habermas's orientation for political thought comes at the expense of normative hierarchies that this orientation perpetuates between the cosmopolitan theorist and the global audience to, and on behalf, of whom he speaks. Connolly's orientation, in contrast, suggests the possibility of a different kind of normative structure to the encounter between the cosmopolitical theorist and his actual and implied interlocutors, and therefore a different understanding of what timeliness in cosmopolitical theory might mean.

Kant on Orientation

In Kant's essay 'What is Orientation in Thinking?', which comments on the dispute between Mendlessohn and Jacobi concerning knowledge of the existence of God, Kant describes how spatial orientation is only possible because of our subjective feeling of the distinction between right and left.⁷ He then draws out an analogy between orientation in relation to objects that can be experienced in space and time (sun, moon etc.) and orientation in judgments for which no intuition of the object is possible, such as in the case of the existence of God.⁸ In the case of the latter, nothing can be known about the reality of the object of judgment:

It is at this point, however, that *the right of the need* of reason supervenes as a subjective ground for presupposing and accepting something which reason cannot presume to know on objective grounds, and hence for *orientating* ourselves in thought – i.e. in the immeasurable space of the supra-sensory realm which we see as full of utter darkness – purely by means of the need to reason itself.⁹

Kant goes on to distinguish between theoretical and practical judgments that exceed the realm of the objects of possible experience. In the case of the former, we may *wish* to pass judgment on the ultimate causes of things and thus end up invoking the existence of God. But this is not something we are obliged to do. In the case of the latter, we are *compelled* to pass judgment, in order for the highest good of morality, implied by the moral law, not to be simply an *ideal*.¹⁰ According to Kant, reason does not feel, yet 'it perceives its own deficiency and produces a feeling of need through the cognitive impulse'¹¹. This feeling of need is *rational belief*, subjectively certain but not objectively grounded. Rational belief in

God, as the independent highest good, operates as ‘the signpost or compass by means of which the speculative thinker can orientate himself on his rational wanderings in the field of supra-sensory objects’, and it operates as a guide to the thought and action of ordinary men (not philosophers).¹² Kant’s focus in the essay is on the pitfalls of treating the existence of God as a demonstrable, theoretical truth.¹³ But his argument has broader implications, since it speaks to the *practical* requirement for a particular kind of connection to be drawn between phenomenal and noumenal realms. Subjective certainty of the existence of God is not necessary to authorise moral truths or to motivate moral action, but it is, on Kant’s account, necessary to provide a sense of moral direction for the moral subject.¹⁴ A kind of subjective feeling, analogous to the capacity to tell left from right, anchors and enables accurate moral navigation in the phenomenal realm.

The importance of orientation in thinking for Kant, is evident in a variety of his writings on practical philosophy, including his anthropology and ethics.¹⁵ It plays a particularly significant role in his works on history and politics, in which Kant offers us a story of how nature, freewill and reason work complementarily to produce culture that, over time, ensures both juridical and moral progress for mankind.¹⁶ For Kant, nature supplies crucial ingredients of human history, from climate to instinctual drives, but these must not be confused with either freewill or with the human capacity to identify the requirements of autonomous reason and develop a genuinely rational (moral) will. According to Kant’s argument, the catalysts of desire and reason work along parallel, mutually reinforcing tracks.¹⁷ On the one hand, man’s ‘unsociable sociability’ drives co-operation within and between states via competitive mechanisms. On the other hand, reason has the power to transform a ‘pathologically enforced’ union into a ‘moral whole’.

These two kinds of stories, driven by distinctive principles, run through Kant’s philosophy of right and his philosophical histories.¹⁸ In ‘Perpetual Peace: a philosophical

sketch', as well as in various speculative accounts of the origins and ends of human history, Kant links the possibility of progress specifically to the development of a certain kind of republican state, as well as to the implications of the practices of both commerce and war.¹⁹ For Kant, therefore, choices based on both desire and reason drive history towards a condition of republican states, linked together in an ordered international society which recognises levels of state, international and cosmopolitan right. Nevertheless, it is also clear that Kant's projected telos of perpetual peace can only be realised through the exercise of human will, which is reducible to neither natural nor rational determination. Kant therefore has a difficulty accounting for his assurance that the exercise of human will will actually follow the prescribed direction, whether willy-nilly (through the clash of interests and the pursuit of desire) or self-consciously (through the embrace of the moral law). Kant addresses this difficulty through a return to the question of orientation.

In essays such as, 'An Old Question Raised Again: is the human race continually progressing?'²⁰ and 'Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose'²¹, Kant differentiates his philosophy of history from a type of philosophical investigation into the principles governing historical development. In both essays he points to the impossibility of discerning an ethical direction (progressive, retrogressive, static) to human history on the basis of empirical evidence. He identifies this as a problem of *perspective*: 'If the course of human affairs seems so senseless to us, perhaps it lies in a poor choice of position from which we regard it'²². The ideal position would be 'the standpoint of Providence', beyond history, from which the future can be seen (known). But this is not a standpoint available to human beings, so we need some other way of orientating ourselves, a signpost or rational belief that will enable judgment.

As with the existence of God ‘the right of the need of reason’ to assume progress in history is required in order to make the highest good something more than a mere ideal. In order to fulfil reason’s requirement of orientation in relation to world history and politics, Kant goes on to identify an event in empirical history that points to the ‘disposition and capacity of the human race to be the cause of its own advance towards the better’²³. Not the French Revolution itself, but the sympathy it inspired in disinterested spectators of the revolution, that is to say the feelings of enlightened men, philosophers.²⁴

The philosopher cannot be sure of what, if anything, propels the ‘arbitrary play of human freedom’, therefore he cannot be sure that empirical history is actually developing teleologically towards the ‘perfect civil union of mankind’. Because of this, it is necessary for the philosopher to interpret history *as if* it had a purpose in keeping with a rational, moral will. On the one hand, this keeps the hope of progress alive, but even more importantly, the judgement of history as if it were progress testifies to the ends of reason in the rational belief of the philosopher. Thus the historical intervention of the philosopher’s judgment can be cited to confirm the truth of his diagnosis of his own times and of the forces shaping history, even as he denies his ability to demonstrate a pattern of progress in the inchoate mess of empirical political events.

The political task of philosophical history is to intervene in the empirical, to influence the judgement of leaders and populations, to encourage enlightenment and the self-conscious implementation of the political project of republican government and perpetual peace. The relation between past, present and future prescribed in Kant’s philosophical history is effectively guaranteed only by the degree to which the philosopher’s orientation is shared with others. This is an orientation that fuses, in the rational belief of the philosopher, the time of enlightenment in Europe as experienced

and witnessed in Königsberg, with the ‘immeasurable time’ of the highest good. This rational belief, a feeling that is no feeling, is also the affective core of being Kant the philosophical spectator. And being Kant, or being like Kant, makes possible the kinds of readings of history that will contribute towards world-historical progress.

Kant’s orientation for thinking world politics is premised on the theoretical impossibility of ‘seeing’ from ‘nowhere’ coupled with the practical necessity to do precisely this. This paradox is resolved through the subjective certainty of the thinker that history *must* be read *as if* it were progress. This means that when it comes to orientation in thinking about world politics, it is a question of space, time and a consequent timeliness embodied in the philosopher himself. The orientation in terms of sympathetic reaction to the French Revolution operates so as to unify the space/time of the world (this is not about one nation but about all nations). This is world-historical and world-political time, it is also the *present*, a global ‘now’ with implications for all future presents that are only fully apparent to the philosopher, whose interventions in debate are therefore *timely* in a way that holds genuine promise for the future. The philosophical spectator takes on the role, and also the obligations, of Providence.

In terms of its implications for cosmopolitan political theory, whether explanatory or normative, Kant’s orientation for political thinking organizes the world, spatially, temporally and morally in a particular way. The world of nations acquires *a* centre and *a* future in which the highest good is manifested. Peripheral places become identified with temporal as well as spatial distance, backward in the progressive workings of history. But this spatio-temporal distance is also a moral distance. The fusion of noumenal and phenomenal worlds in the subjective certainty of the spectators of the French Revolution testifies to their capacities for moral navigation,

capacities that are in principle inherent in all rational beings, not just German philosophers. On Kant's own account, though it is somewhat ambiguous when it comes to women and other races, no adult humans fall outside of the category of rational being.²⁵ To the extent that others do not orientate their thought along Kantian lines, then they are in some kind of error. Two sorts of error are possible on Kant's account of the human condition. There are wilful errors, in which rational beings knowingly act wrongly, and for which they should therefore be held responsible, in which case the vocabularies of guilt, shame and punishment are appropriate. But there are also inadvertent errors that follow from ignorance and immaturity, in which case, as with children, education is the answer.²⁶ This means that spatio-temporally distant people and peoples, from the perspective of the rational belief of the philosopher, precisely because they are moral equals are *a priori* identified as in need of either punishment or education to set them right.

Cosmopolitanism: Habermas and the 'Kantian Project'

Since the end of the Cold War, the substantive claims of Kant's cosmopolitan political philosophy have been a crucial resource for a range of theorists attempting to tackle questions of global justice, human rights and cosmopolitan democracy.²⁷ Amongst the most prominent of these is Habermas, who explicitly defends what he terms the 'Kantian project' of 'constitutionalizing' international law as the appropriate normative (moral, legal and political) response to the spread of capitalist globalization and the threat of ethno-nationalism in the post-Cold War world. In his essay 'The Kantian Project and the Divided West'²⁸, Habermas defends the ongoing 'juridification' of international politics through a combination of philosophical and socio-historical argument, in which the questions of what international

politics is and what it ought to be are inextricably entangled with one another. The essay begins with a historical claim:

Following two world wars, the constitutionalization of international law has evolved along the lines prefigured by Kant toward cosmopolitan law and has assumed institutional form in international constitutions, organizations and procedures.²⁹

Habermas explains this historical trend as the product of collective learning processes of a double kind.³⁰ These learning processes reflect the lesson of the horrors of war but also the lesson learned *within* the modern constitutional state that law, properly understood, rationalizes power in a normatively positive way.³¹ It is the latter lesson that is most crucial, since it demonstrates the connection *in principle* between law and peace.³² Habermas reads the idea that there is a conceptual connection between peace and law back into the logical and historical implications of international law, which, he argues, have become increasingly, though still inadequately, constitutionalized during the twentieth century. He departs from Kant, however, in refusing the two options he (Kant) presents for the *telos* of inter-state relations, that of constitution as a world republic on the one hand,³³ and that of the ‘league or confederation of nations’ on the other³⁴. Instead, Habermas goes on to build on Kant’s analysis in a different way, arguing that the constitutionalization of international law is complementary rather than analogous to the constitutionalization of law within the state.³⁵ According to Habermas, the kind of constitution already implicit in supranational and transnational organizations implies a multi-level system of authority. He sees the constitutions (founding treaties and charters) of existing organizations such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization and, above all, the European Union, as foreshadowing the shape that such a multi-level constitutionalized global order is likely to take.³⁶

Habermas's adaptation of the 'Kantian project' attempts to draw out the logic implicit in the idea of law, but, as with Kant, goes beyond the realm of the 'idea' by identifying signposts within empirical history, specifically the empirical history of Western modernity. As with Kant also, however, Habermas is insistent that the necessary links between law and peace may not be empirically realised within the workings of historical time and that this therefore necessitates (makes the theorist responsible for) reading history from a cosmopolitan point of view.³⁷ Kant, Habermas argues, used his philosophy of history to help render the cosmopolitan condition empirically probable and plausible. According to Habermas, Kant's identification of cosmopolitan historical trends in his philosophy of history suffered from blind-spots inherent in his time and place, but nevertheless remains significant in principle insofar as it rests on 'the cognitive procedure of universalization and mutual perspective-taking which Kant associates with practical reason and which underlies the cosmopolitan transformation of international law'³⁸. Habermas therefore undertakes to read the history of international law and international politics in a way that does better justice to Kant's insights into the real meaning of progress in history.

Habermas goes on to offer a reading of the history of international politics and successive institutionalisations of international law that point to ways in which it accords with, and ways in which it runs counter to, any cosmopolitan promise. As well as cosmopolitan innovations in international law, such as the spread of international human rights law in the Cold War period or the humanitarian interventions of the 1990s, there are also many examples of the redundancy and manipulation of the UN and its founding principles. In addition, these developments in the 'high politics' of international relations are situated in the wider context of, 'the emergence of a world society, chiefly as a result of the globalization of markets and communication networks'³⁹. However, although he does not claim that globalization is straightforwardly progressive (in his terms) in its effects, nevertheless Habermas does claim

that the pressures of globalization tend to strengthen the common interest of states in the rule of law and also socialize state actors to act in ways that acknowledge mutual dependence and increasingly undermine the distinction between domestic and foreign policy. The latter effect of globalization reinforces the principled link between all law and its (rationally required) legitimate grounding in democratic will-formation and fundamental human rights. This is exemplified, for Habermas, by the case of the EU in which ‘if the chains of democratic legitimation are not to break, civic solidarity must extend across former national borders within the enlarged communities’⁴⁰. In this respect, globalization reinforces the previously relatively weak link between international law and ‘world citizens’ and greatly enhances the chances of the cosmopolitan logic of international law unfolding historically.⁴¹

For Habermas, the world-historical significance of Western modernity lies in its institutionalisation of practices of communicative rationalisation at the socio-political level. Just as for Kant, only societies that embed the principle of right in a republican constitution can bring politics into accord with the demands of practical reason, so for Habermas, only those societies that embed the possibility of discursive validation of claims to truth and justice can take forward the *telos* immanent in communicative action. Like Kant, Habermas, having identified the ideal *telos* of history, recognises that development towards that *telos* is not inevitable, and that one must distinguish between empirical and philosophical history. Like Kant also, however, he sees the task of the philosopher as being to further the promise of philosophical history by reading it ‘from a cosmopolitan point of view’, in which the idea of Europe (now instantiated as the European Union [EU]) as both centre and future is confirmed.

On the one hand, the philosopher’s reading of history represents a transcendental moral judgment of what ‘ought to be’ a categorical imperative for those dedicated to progress. On the other hand, the reading of history is presented as immanent to historical development. On the one hand, progress is carried self-consciously by principles of self-reflexivity built into

complex societies, on the other hand it is carried willy nilly by processes such as globalization that intensify that complexity and carry it beyond state borders. Habermas's argument replicates Kant's in its reliance on a particular relation between the empirical (measurable time, phenomenal) and the moral (immeasurable time, noumenal), in which the latter is carried through, but also shapes the former. The role of the philosopher is both to interpret the meaning and direction of political time and to intervene to push historical development in the 'right' direction. His insights are a product of his time and place (western modernity) but they are also universally valid and applicable (timely).

Habermas's arguments demonstrate how an orientation for thinking that involves the subjective identification of a particular place and time with the impossible 'view from nowhere' fuses the temporalization and moralization of world politics. The assumptions underlying Habermas's ethical and historical-sociological claims are not the same as Kant's. In particular, he completely rejects the hierarchical views about race and sex that we find in the earlier thinker. Nevertheless, when it comes to the reading of the present Habermas precisely echoes Kant's strategy of reading progress into the developed western democratic states that constitute his own home for thought. And this inevitably inflects his reading of the relation between those kinds of states, their norms and cultures, and other kinds of states, norms and cultures. Aspirations towards a 'positive' version of perpetual peace in the contemporary world, are also always orientations towards principles and values that are inscribed in some (more grown up) parts of the world rather than others. The ways in which different parts of the world come into communication with each other are therefore asymmetrical in terms of their orientation towards the universal.

The First World thus defines so to speak the meridian of a present by which the political simultaneity of economic and cultural nonsimultaneity is measured.⁴²

The idea of ‘non-simultaneity’, which Habermas uses to describe the differential socio-political realities of ‘first’, ‘second’ and ‘third’ world states in contemporary world politics is heavily normatively laden.⁴³ To be ‘non-simultaneous’ with OECD countries, that is to say backward in relation to those countries, is to be out of step with progress in history, not purely on grounds of capacity, but also on grounds of political mentality. This does not mean that liberal democratic states always act rightly, it means rather that such states have special responsibilities, which reflect their particular capacity for timeliness, in an incomplete cosmopolitan condition. Two examples of such responsibilities to which Habermas draws attention are those of humanitarian intervention and cross-cultural dialogue. In relation to the former, Habermas is fully alive to the potential for powerful liberal democratic states, in the absence of a fully constitutionalized international order, to use doctrines of humanitarian intervention or ‘responsibility to protect’ in order to serve their own interests. Nevertheless, ultimately, it is only such states that can be trusted to undertake such actions, because these are the only states that have, as it were, subjectively internalised an orientation towards the universal end of history.

When there is no other way, democratic
neighbouring states must be permitted to
intervene in an emergency in accordance with
customary international law. But in such cases
the incompleteness of the cosmopolitan
condition demands exceptional sensitivity.⁴⁴

Something similar applies when it comes to cross-cultural dialogue. Habermas is fully sensible of the dangers of Western cultural imperialism, but he is also convinced that the orientation of the global world-historical present remains ‘the essentially unchanging horizon of social modernity and the associated normative self-understanding which developed after the

end of the eighteenth century'⁴⁵. And until such time as the rest of the world catches up, Habermas is also clear that it is only within Western culture that the resources can be found for resisting Western cultural imperialism; 'overcoming Eurocentrism demands that the West make proper use of its own cognitive resources'⁴⁶. However much Western cultures and polities may have failed to live up to the ideal of mutual perspective taking, it is nevertheless within such cultures and polities that the potential to actualise such mutual perspective taking has been enabled and nurtured. The normative self-understanding of others either fails the test of communicative reason or testifies to the universalisation of the 'horizon of social modernity'. The kind of travelling involved in mutual perspective taking is therefore very different depending on your starting point. Whereas the Eurocentric westerner overcomes his eurocentrism by coming home, the traditionalist third-worlder or the chauvinistic second-worlder overcomes his or her traditionalism or chauvinism by travelling westwards. The kind of conversation between different value systems that Habermas envisages, in spite of its overt insistence on respect for non-Western cultures, remains asymmetrical in much the same way as Kant's implied conversation between enlightened and non-enlightened peoples. Precisely because moral equality is taken as foundational and the moral point of view is fused with the present of liberal democracy, the spatio/temporal other is identified at worst with guilt, but more often with immaturity.

Habermas acknowledges the complexity of world politics, nevertheless, he confirms that the range of possibilities inherent in world politics derive from a temporal trajectory inherent (for good or ill) in western modernity.⁴⁷ This is not simply because of the contingent fact that western powers acquired unprecedented global power over the course of the last few centuries, but because western political time is presumed to be world-political time, the time that drives or leads (or must be treated *as if* it drives or leads) historical development. Orientation in the time of enlightenment enables an overarching sense to be made of foreign

policy making, international law, global civil society activity, humanitarian intervention, global governance, multiculturalism and intra and inter-state politics in general. These temporal/ moral assumptions do not prevent Habermas from acknowledging that there are a variety of phenomena and events, of other histories and experiences, that play a role in world politics (phenomena which might include authoritarian capitalist states, religion, non-western culture, clientalist politics, imperialism, colonization). But Habermas reduces the significance of such phenomena for the purposes of diagnosis and prescription by relegating them simultaneously to the past and to the realm of moral failure.

Kant's argument, that there cannot be thought without orientation, follows from the impossibility of thinking without the subjective certainty that provides co-ordinates for the speculative thinker (going beyond the realm of experience), in the same way as the subjective consciousness of the distinction between right and left enables him to be located in the world of sense. His account of what orientation entails when it comes to practical reason, fuses a particular spatio-temporal location (home for thought) with the promise of the highest good. The place from which to think is, it turns out, his home. Kant's argument sets up a co-incidence between spatio-temporal and moral homes that confronts later thinkers with the puzzle of how to reconcile the moral equality of individuals with the moral hierarchy of homes. Habermas resolves the puzzle by reference to different stages of collective moral learning that are embedded in transitions from simple to complex societies, and holds out the promise that with the right kind of home will come the right kind of thought.

Of course, one way of responding to this would be to simply dismiss the claim that practical reason requires orientation, and to work to demonstrate how particular ethical/ political perspectives correspond to a 'view from nowhere'. On this account, political theory does not and should not rely on any kind of claim that is not rationally demonstrable regardless of the subjective certainties of either the theorist or the audience to which his or her claims are

addressed. Which would mean that the claims of the right (correct) kind of political theory are always true and always timely. Contemporary cosmopolitan theories that take their cue from Kant's *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* or *Critique of Practical Reason* rather than from his writings on judgment, history, politics and anthropology, tend to assume an unmediated application of the rational (noumenal) to the phenomenal world.⁴⁸ With the result that they are compelled to identify those out of step with the requirements of reason as irrational or wicked rather than backward or misled. But whether one takes a more or less thoroughly rationalist account of moral and political theory, the repertoire of possibilities for relating to those not at home in the theorists' convictions is asymmetrical and hierarchical and does not disturb the presumption that the theorist possesses the authoritative key to the cosmopolitical present(s). Across the spectrum of cosmopolitanisms, prescriptive theories of global ethics and politics are built on the assumption that a large part of the world's population is, at best, a junior, and largely silent, partner in the conversation. But if one seeks to avoid the paradoxical parochialism of rationalism and historicism in cosmopolitical thought, then one has to address the question of *how* thought may be orientated in a way that may generate different sorts of possibilities for transnational and global ethical and political engagement.

Cosmopolitical times: Connolly's disorientations of the 'Kantian Project'

William Connolly is one of a range of critical and postcolonial thinkers who are currently engaged in articulating non-Kantian answers to the Kantian question of what is orientation in thinking when it comes to addressing normative issues in the cosmopolitical present(s).⁴⁹ As with Kant and Habermas, Connolly rejects the idea that there can be perspectiveless thinking. As with Kant and Habermas also, he is committed to progressive engagement with transnational and global ethical and political issues. In contrast to Kant and

Habermas, however, Connolly is unconvinced by a reading of world political time that identifies the moral universal with the time and space of western modernity through the ‘as if’ strategy of philosophical history. In place of the philosophical moves that synthesize world history into a singular, linear story with a past, present and future, Connolly proposes a radically different way of thinking about the temporality of world politics, and therefore also the spatio-temporal orientation of the normative theorist of world politics. Connolly’s ethical and political theory is oriented in time that is plural rather than singular and unpredictable rather than linear. This account of time is first articulated in his argument in *Neuropolitics: thinking, culture, speed*, where he characterizes the time of thinking as an ‘out of joint’ emergence and coming together of a range of virtual pasts in relation to an ongoing, given present which yields a previously unpredictable future.⁵⁰ Connolly argues that the asymmetries in the temporality of thinking, which perpetually destabilize and transform the temporal organization of pasts, presents and futures, have their parallel in the experience of ‘out of jointness’ between different public, political temporalities.

In this context Connolly engages with Wolin’s argument that in the contemporary world, political time is not synchronous with the temporalities governing communication and culture. For Wolin, political time needs to be slow in order to allow for the possibility of democratic political action and engagement, it is therefore necessary to resist the acceleration of time embedded in non-political orders, and revive a ‘politics of place’⁵¹. Connolly accepts the idea that there are asymmetries of temporal ordering within the contemporary world, but resists Wolin’s conclusion:

- - Wolin and I both reject the cyclical image of slow time adopted by many ancients. But I also find myself at odds with progressive, teleological, and linear conceptions of time set against it.

Against these four images I embrace the idea of rifts or forks in time that help to constitute it as time. A rift as constitutive of time itself, in which time flows into a future neither fully determined by a discernable past nor fixed by its place in a cycle of eternal return, nor directed by an intrinsic purpose pulling it along. Free time. Or, better, time as becoming, replete with the dangers and possibilities attached to such a world.⁵²

In *Pluralism*, Connolly further unpacks the meaning of time as ‘becoming’ suggested in the above quotation, by treating time in this sense as the interaction between immanent chronologies.⁵³ This leads him to distinguish between two different sorts of temporality association with a ‘politics of being’ on the one hand, and a ‘politics of becoming’ on the other. A political temporality of being refers to relatively stable contexts for political judgment and action, on the basis of which one can extrapolate the meaning of progress in accordance with given, sedimented criteria. In contrast, the political temporality of becoming refers to shifting and unfamiliar contexts for political judgment and action, where criteria for the meaning of progress must be negotiated without the certainties embedded in a politics of being.⁵⁴

From Connolly’s point of view, Kantian cosmopolitan theories of world politics, such as that of Habermas, remain within the temporal register of the politics of being, and have therefore been unable to do justice to either plurality or unpredictability in their diagnoses of the times. For Connolly, such theorists, in their evaluation of the promise of the world-political present, are caught up in a ‘concentric’ understanding of culture, in which a particular, parochial temporality is treated as if it can generate the force that will bind increasingly distant circles of humanity together. Both cosmopolitan and anti-cosmopolitan thinkers, according to Connolly, fail to

appreciate the eccentric temporal flows that cut across and disrupt the circles of a concentric vision of the world, and that do so as much within the ‘inner circle’ of liberalism or capitalism as in the outer circles of ‘others’.⁵⁵ Connolly argues that ‘presentness’ is always constituted by a plurality of ‘presents’ inscribed in diverse, immanent temporalities and he rejects the idea that any unifying temporal orientation provides the master key to the meaning of ‘presentness’. His reading of political time is simultaneously a critique of the ‘concentric’ orientation in thinking that dominates cosmopolitan political theory and the basis for a different mode of orientation for thought in which the contingent and ongoing cross-contamination of different temporal orderings becomes the starting point for understanding and judgment.⁵⁶

In a comment on some recent interpretations of his work in the *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Connolly attempts to spell out what is meant by this kind of orientation towards ethical and political thought in an era of globalization. He describes such an orientation as the risky endeavour of keeping your place whilst at the same time being open to your own displacement, simultaneously centred and decentred.

The gift involves listening on several registers to others whose clamour disturbs and disrupts something in you. The risk is that you may succumb to premature closure or that your pluralist response may be rejected or that you will concede too much.⁵⁷

There is a marked contrast between Connolly’s account of what follows from his pluralized orientation for thought and Habermas’s account of the responsibilities of cross-cultural dialogue in cosmopolitical times. For Habermas, ethical engagement with other ‘nonsimultaneous’ cultures and mentalities is enabled through his living up to the reason inherent in his own time. The aspiration of mutual perspective taking is taken to be inherent in the resources for thought opened up (as well as closed down) by western modernity. But this means that the perspectives taken by

the parties to communicative engagement place the interlocutors not just differently but also hierarchically. To live up to the best inscribed in your own present, and which you know to be the direction in which history should be treated as travelling, is different than to be obliged to overcome your present in order to live up to a putative, alien future. It's not that the western theorist cannot be wrong or guilty, but to the extent that he or she is mistaken or wicked, it is because he or she fails to live up to his or her own standards, to be punished or corrected is to come home, not to be expelled from home. On this account, affective disturbance, at the level of who you are as opposed to what you do, is confined to the interlocutors of the western theorist, who, in their guilt or backwardness, live the painful dislocation of their non-contemporaneity with western political time.

In contrast, for Connolly, 'listening on several registers *to others whose clamour disturbs and disrupts something in you*' the theorist is as open to affective disturbance as his interlocutors. To operate with a pluralised, non-linear temporal orientation is not simply to work with the acknowledgement that you may be wrong, on Connolly's account, but to lay yourself open to the pain of being temporally/ morally 'out of joint', of becoming the equivalent of the child or the transgressor.⁵⁸ Unlike Kant's philosophical spectator, whose grasp of the times is more essential than that of those *making* the times, Connolly's 'immanent naturalist'⁵⁹ participates in the same partiality that characterizes all political action. There is no route to the 'immeasurable time' of a supersensible beyond. Instead there is only a plurality of out of jointness of selves and others with themselves and others, a multiplicity of simultaneous orientation and disorientation.

But in what sense is this orientation at all? It would seem rather to correspond to the position, often referred to by Connolly, of Nietzsche's madman announcing the death of God in terms of a fundamental disorientation, in which the possibility of judgment, and therefore of timeliness in political theory, is completely undermined. How can the political or ethical theorist represent, speak for, and make a difference to the future of world politics in terms of the present,

when his or her rational belief is no longer regarded as fusing the distinction between measurable and immeasurable time? Or, put another way, how is it possible to engage in productive ethical and political thinking that is, to borrow from Chakrabarty, *heterotemporally* orientated?⁶⁰ Connolly tackles this question by trying to think through the implications of his argument for the conduct of relations with others with whom he disagrees. He speaks of the possibility of ‘a relation of agonistic respect between orientations’ that can only emerge out of a different relation to one’s subjective certainties than we find in the Kantian model of the moral and political theorist.⁶¹ For the latter, the relation between subjective certainty and spatio-temporal location operates as a virtuous circle. In finding confirmation of moral certainties (which are in principle empirically indemonstrable) in his own historical place and time, the philosopher is simultaneously contributing to the global realization of those certainties. For the moral and political theorist oriented in terms of plural and non-linear time, however, this is a vicious circle in which parochialism in thought and politics is perpetually reaffirmed. If thought requires orientation, then the circle can only be broken by the kind of affective work (punishment and education) on subjective certainty that Kantian and Habermasian cosmopolitanisms reserve for those who are standardly positioned as simultaneously in the time/place of the human being worth of respect, and dislocated from it to the position of the child and/or the transgressor.

Conclusion

There is a fast growing cosmopolitan literature on issues such as humanitarian intervention, human rights and global justice, which is largely dominated by a Kantian orientation in ethical and political theory. Habermas is only one of a number of theorists who see humanitarian intervention

as embodying the moral ethos of modernity and signifying the radical potential of our particular world-political present. A heterotemporal orientation to theorising cosmopolitical times decentres the position of the Kantian critic by questioning the assumption of a fusion between his or her particular present and ‘the’ present of world politics. It raises the question as to why humanitarianism should be taken as a sign of the distinctiveness of the world-political present. For whom, and from whose perspective is this a novel development? Does it mark a normative difference in the conduct of world politics or simply confirm a set of longstanding patterns? To raise the question of novelty is to disturb the kinds of subjective certainty, of ‘at homeness’ in thought, that render phenomena such as humanitarian intervention straightforwardly timely. In this respect, a heterotemporal orientation makes the work of the theorist much harder, since it requires the painful, political effort of cross-temporal engagement without the short cuts enabled by the taken for granted fusion of his or her particular present with the end of history.⁶²

In only ever being partially at home, heterotemporally oriented normative judgment partakes of the partiality and revisability of the presents to which it is immanent. If humanitarian intervention is identified with the potential globalization of justice, then a heterotemporal orientation would suggest that what is needed is to begin by acknowledging and examining political temporalities of violation, in order to understand the meanings of injustice in the present. This would enable judgment of the likely effects of the institutionalisation of particular normative priorities in the principles and practices of international humanitarianism. But it would also open up the question of what kinds of violation matter and why, and offer a different route to the establishment of international hierarchies of outrage than that reflected in the moral priorities of existing international human rights regimes. The world’s ‘clocks’ may or may not already chime in harmony on these issues, but from the viewpoint of heterotemporality this is something to be discovered rather than assumed.

Within predominant contemporary diagnoses of, and prescriptions for, world politics the problem is not that the co-existence of a plurality of orientations goes unrecognised, so much as that the meaning of this plurality is always already homogenised by reference to the authoritative space/time of western modernity. It is the subjective certainty of this orientation that not only grounds the theorist's judgment but also enables it to make a difference in practice, through timely prescription and through example. Connolly's argument holds out the promise of a different kind of timeliness for ethical and political thought, one that renders the work of the theorist less heroic and less certainly effective. Instead of being the one who already knows the time, the heterotemporally oriented theorist is fundamentally uncertain of his own punctuality. The extent to which his interventions are or are not timely will depend on the moral/temporal certainties and uncertainties (orientations) of his interlocutors. And any making of the times will necessarily be a collaborative enterprise.

¹ I am grateful for the comments of two reviewers of an earlier version of this article and to the Visiting Fellowship Scheme at the University of Queensland which enabled me to revise the article in the light of those comments in March 2010.

² Jürgen Habermas and Eduardo Mendieta, 'A Conversation about God and the World', in Habermas, *Time of Transitions*, edited and translated by Ciaran Cronin and Max Pensky (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006): 157.

³ A large and growing body of work in postcolonial social and political history and theory has offered a variety of explanations of these twin tendencies in western thought. See Robert Young *Postcolonialism: an historical introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001); Edward Said *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: toward a history of the vanishing present* (Cambridge MA.: Harvard University Press, 1999); Dipesh Chakrabarty *Provincializing Europe: postcolonial thought and historical difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Pheng Cheah *Spectral Nationality: passages of freedom from Kant to postcolonial literatures of liberation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); John M. Hobson *The Eastern origins of Western Civilization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁴ Barry Hindess, 'The Past is Another Culture', *International Political Sociology* 1 (4) 2007: 325-338.

⁵ I adopt the term 'cosmopolitical' from the work of Pheng Cheah, *Inhuman Conditions: on cosmopolitanism and human rights* (Cambridge MA.: Harvard University Press, 2006): 30-44, which he uses to refer to the global field of political, economic and cultural forces. This is in contrast to 'cosmopolitan' and 'cosmopolitanism', which are used to refer to universalist theories of international and global politics.

⁶ 'Orientalism' is being used here in the sense formulated in Said's work, *Orientalism* op. cit.

⁷ Immanuel Kant 'What is Orientation in Thinking', in Hans Reiss (ed) *Kant: Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991): 238-9.

⁸ Ibid.: 241-246.

⁹ Ibid.: 240-241.

¹⁰ Ibid.: 242-3.

¹¹ Ibid.: Footnote 243.

¹² Ibid.: 245.

¹³ Pitfalls of zealotry and superstition, 'What is Orientation': 248-9.

¹⁴ Ibid.: 243.

¹⁵ Munzel has argued that the notion of orientation in Kant's essay is essentially equivalent to the workings of reflective judgement, and treats it as a key to the whole of Kant's moral philosophy and the significance of character and virtue in his thought, see G. Felicitas Munzel *Kant's Conception of Moral Character* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999).

¹⁶ Key sources for the following interpretation of Kant's philosophy of history are found in the essays collected in *Kant: Political Writings* op. cit., in particular 'Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose', 'Perpetual Peace: a philosophical sketch', 'Reviews of Herder's *Ideas on the Philosophy of History of Mankind*', and 'What is Called Orientation in Thinking'. See also 'An Old Question Raised Again' trans. L. White Beck, Robert Anchor and Emile Fackenheim in *Conflict of the Faculties* translated and introduced by Mary J. Gregor (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1992); and *Metaphysics of Morals* introduced and translated by Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). See also Kimberly Hutchings *Kant, Critique and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996). Kant's political philosophy clearly changes in a variety of respects in its emphases before and after the French Revolution. However, there remains a strong continuity in his political thought when it comes to the idea of 'orientation', or of perspectives for political judgment in his lesser political writings from the mid-1780s onwards.

¹⁷ Kant, 'Perpetual Peace: a philosophical sketch': 112.

¹⁸ Ibid.: 108-114.

¹⁹ Ibid.: 99-102; 113-114.

²⁰ Kant, 'An Old Question Raised Again': 141-171.

²¹ Kant, 'Idea for a Universal History' in Saner (ed) *Kant: Political Writings*: 41-53.

²² Kant, 'An Old Question': 149. For Kant there is simply no point in considering history as sheer contingency: "It is a vain affair to have good so alternate with evil that the whole traffic of our species with itself on this globe could have to be considered as a mere farcical comedy, for this can endow our species with no greater value in the eyes of reason than that which other animal species possess, species which carry on this game with fewer costs and without expenditure of thought." (Ibid.: 147)

²³ Ibid.: 151.

[Universal History': 51-2.](#)

²⁵ Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* translated by Victor Lyle Dowdell (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996): 216-251. See Robert Bernasconi 'Who Invented the Concept of Race? Kant's Role in the Enlightenment Construction of Race' in R. Bernasconi (ed) *Race* (Malden MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2001): 9-36.

²⁶ Kant *Metaphysics of Morals*: 266-272.

²⁷ In addition to Habermas, considered below, see for example: David Held *Democracy and the Global Order: from the modern state to global governance* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995); J. Bohman & M. Lutz-Bachmann (ed) *Perpetual Peace: essays on Kant's cosmopolitan ideal* (Cambridge MA.: MIT Press, 1997); Andrew Linklater *The Transformation of Political Community* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998); Thomas Pogge *World Poverty and Human Rights* (2nd Edition, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008); Simon Caney *Justice Beyond Borders: a global political theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²⁸ Jürgen Habermas 'The Kantian Project and the Divided West' in *The Divided West* translated and edited by Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006): 115-193.

²⁹ Ibid.: 115.

³⁰ Ibid.: 147.

³¹ Ibid.: 138-9; 148-150.

³² This conceptual connection, which Habermas elucidates at length in *Between Facts and Norms: contributions to a discourse theory of law and democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), derives from the formal properties of law itself, first properly unpacked, on Habermas's account, in the social contract theories of Rousseau and Kant ('The Kantian Project': 131). On Habermas's reading of Rousseau's and Kant's arguments, law puts an end to the wars of the state of nature not because it equates to the sword in the hands of leviathan, as for Hobbes, but because the universal form of law presupposes conditions of equality and impartiality that can only be fully satisfied if positive law is grounded in a constitution in which democratic will-formation and fundamental rights are embedded. Civil peace within the state, therefore, is only ultimately to be found within the constitutional state and, for similar reasons, peace between states could only be ensured for Kant if they (states) entered a law-governed condition under a cosmopolitan constitution (Ibid.: 121-122). According to Habermas, this explains Kant's arguments for reading history from a cosmopolitan point of view (Ibid.: 122).

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- ³³ Ibid.: 123.
- ³⁴ Ibid.: 124.
- ³⁵ Ibid.: 134.
- ³⁶ Ibid.: 140-141.
- ³⁷ Ibid.: 144.
- ³⁸ Ibid.: 146.
- ³⁹ Ibid.: 175.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid.: 177.
- ⁴¹ Ibid.: 135. In the concluding sections of the essay, Habermas examines three alternatives to an interpretation of the times of world politics in terms of the ‘Kantian project’ (179-193). The first is ‘hegemonic liberalism’, the second, ‘neo-liberal and post-Marxist arguments’, and the third ‘Schmittian’ arguments. In each case, Habermas’s defence of his Kantian alternative in contrast to these others rests on its claim to offer a more plausible understanding of the nature of law, and the analytical and normative implications of that understanding.
- ⁴² Habermas, ‘Kant’s Idea of Perpetual Peace: at two hundred years historical remove’, in Ciaran Cronin and Pablo de Grieff (eds) *The Inclusion of the Other* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999): 184; 183-185.
- ⁴³ Ibid.: 185; and ‘From Power Politics to Cosmopolitan Society’ in *Time of Transitions*: 29.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid.: 29.
- ⁴⁵ Habermas, ‘A Conversation About God and the World’: 151.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid.: 155-6.
- ⁴⁷ See Habermas, ‘The European Nation-State: on the past and future of sovereignty and citizenship’ and ‘On the Relation between the Nation, the Rule of Law, and Democracy’ both in *The Inclusion of the Other: studies in political theory* op. cit.: 105-153.
- ⁴⁸ Kant *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* trans. J. W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981); *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. L. White Beck (New York: Macmillan, 1956). Much contemporary cosmopolitan moral and political theory does adopt the rationalist view that the theorist should aim for the ‘view from nowhere’. On this account it is simply a coincidence that the prescriptive implications of cosmopolitanism happen to accord with principles and values that emerged in a particular place and time, and that therefore the implications of justice within liberal political community can be straightforwardly translated into the cosmopolitical sphere (See Pogge op. cit.; Caney op. cit.).
- ⁴⁹ These include: Samuel A. Chambers *Untimely Politics* (New York University Press, 2003); Nathan Widder *Reflections on Time and Politics* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 2008); Pheng Cheah *Spectral Nationality* op. cit.; Wendy Brown *Edgework: critical essays on knowledge and politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Kimberly Hutchings *Time and World Politics: thinking the present* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008); see also the work collected in *Derrida and the Time of the Political* edited by Pheng Cheah and Suzanne Guerlac (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009).
- ⁵⁰ William E. Connolly *Neuropolitics: thinking, culture, speed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002): 96-7.
- ⁵¹ Sheldon Wolin ‘What Time Is It?’, *Theory and Event* 1 (1) 1997: http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v001/1.1wol.html. Connolly, *Neuropolitics*: 141.
- ⁵² Ibid.: 144.
- ⁵³ Connolly *Pluralism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005): 103.
- ⁵⁴ Connolly suggests that we can talk about ‘politics of being’ in situations in which there is a high level of political homogeneity, and presumably a high level of consensus in political memory and the collective reading of time’s arrow. Whether or not such political communities exist, in the case of world politics it is clear that ‘politics of being’ could not possibly describe its temporality, although, as Connolly argues, political theorists persistently attempt to read it in this register.
- ⁵⁵ Connolly, *Neuropolitics*: 176-193; ‘Speed, Concentric Cultures and Cosmopolitanism’, *Political Theory* 28 (5) 2000: 596-618.
- ⁵⁶ James Williams, ‘How to be Bicameral: reading William Connolly’s *Pluralism* with Whitehead and Deleuze’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 10 (2) 2008: 140-155.
- ⁵⁷ Connolly, ‘The Power of Assemblages and the Fragility of Things’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 10 (2) 2008: 241-250.
- ⁵⁸ This point is made forcefully by Bonnie Honig in her reading of Connolly’s political theory: ‘The Time of Rights: emergent thoughts in an emergency setting’ in David Campbell and Morton Schoolman (eds) *The New Pluralism: William Connolly and the Contemporary Global Condition* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008): 105.

⁵⁹ “We are immanent naturalists because we think the whole is open to some degree, that we participate in a world of becoming set on multiple spheres of time, that each tier periodically collides or coalesces with models of becoming on other tiers, and that these collisions and collusions sometimes propel new and unpredictable events and entities into natural and cultural history.” Connolly, ‘White Noise’ in Samuel A. Chambers and Terrell Carver (eds) *William E. Connolly: democracy, pluralism and political theory* (London & New York: Routledge, 2008): 303-311.

⁶⁰ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* op. cit..

⁶¹ Connolly, ‘White Noise’: 306.

⁶² It is precisely this that Thomas McCarthy is trying to deal with in his recent work on a critical theory of development. In *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), McCarthy attempts to fuse insights from Kantian and Habermasian critical theory with the arguments of postcolonialism and the critique of linear philosophies of history. His argument illustrates how difficult it is for the term ‘development’ applied to world politics, even in a critical sense, to remain meaningful once the pathway of philosophical history has been abandoned.