

BRUNCH
"Are you a world citizen?:
An exchange on the role of cosmopolitanism in addressing global issues"
April 2004

The following is a summary of the Wisdom at Work discussions:

The first speaker, a former Director of UNRISD, traced the evolution of the notion of community and underlined that only recently has the idea grown to include all of humanity, as most clearly expressed by human rights. He proposed that a community was generally defined by particular institutions, a sense of belonging and mutual obligation, shared values and a feeling of solidarity. The world was now witnessing the emergence of a global community for the first time as shown through the increasing awareness of a common planet and common cultural heritage of humankind; the sharing of values as expressed by international texts and treaties, the existence of global institutions, including among civil society and business; and the impact of globalization through advancing communications and travel opportunities. He asserted that the key to progress in this regard was to make people responsive and accountable to the global community - in this respect he posited the idea of having 25% of the electorate to the US Presidential elections drawn from non-U.S. nationals, and hoped to explore further the feasibility of this legally, as well as application to other contexts.

The second speaker, from the UN, outlined a definition of cosmopolitanism and its various types. He made reference to various UN human rights conventions in deriving a negative definition of a cosmopolitan which he proposed as "one who does not discriminate on the basis of race, colour, nationality, birth status or language". He argued that, theoretically, by this definition most people do not have a cosmopolitan identity. The opposite of cosmopolitanism can be categorised as either "nationalists", those having local and national identities and accepting the identities of others, or "communitarians", including ethnic groups and fundamentalists, those having a specific and exclusive group identity, and mostly valuing their own identity on a higher level than others. He proposed three kinds of living cosmopolitans - mental cosmopolitans, comprised of philosophers, spiritual leaders, and political activists; natural cosmopolitans, either by blood having parents of different nationalities, or by soil in the sense of being migrants; or mobile cosmopolitans, such as business people, international civil servants and diplomats, global civil society activists and in some cases academics. He further concluded that UN civil servants have a duty to be genuine cosmopolitans and uphold a mental cosmopolitan attitude and outlook in their work.

The following is a summary of the main ideas during the follow-up discussions:

- With respect to the role of the media, it was stressed that its role was powerful, having both a positive effect in terms of exposing the problems of the world, but negative in being dominated by sources having particular interests and biases, and the negative impact could be overcome by making known all the various perspectives
- It was suggested that a cosmopolitan approach in the UN should be institutionalised, through for example orientation programmes for new staff as well as continuing

education and training to expand awareness, update knowledge and recall the values-based purpose of the organisation

- There was debate on how useful the notion of cosmopolitanism was given its apparent disconnect from both "realpolitik" in a system which operates through the political will of nation states, as well as losing focus on seeking to have impact on the local/national level. It was emphasised that globalization was an all-encompassing fact which impacted on the lives of people on all levels and which needed to be acknowledged and addressed in a positive fashion, necessitating a global vision. Values were also not confined to borders and should be implemented worldwide. Furthermore, despite its many weaknesses, the UN did still have a certain power and a certain role to play, which was distinct from the interests of individual states. Regarding national level impact, this was being addressed through growing partnerships with local NGOs, national and local governments and other counterparts on the ground.
- It was asserted that we cannot assume that human history ends with the nation state, and should open up to the possibility of an evolving and expanding entity as demonstrated by, for instance, growing regional bodies such as the EU, and hence expanding identities. This process should involve full respect for cultural diversity.