Nationalism, Cosmopolitanism, and Geographical Imaginations
A lecture

Barney Warf (Geography, University of Kansas)
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American Geographical Society Library at
UWM’s Golda Meir Library

The worldly surrounds of the American Geographical Society collection in UWM’s Golda Meir Library made a welcome setting for Barney Warf’s April 2 lecture on “Nationalism, Cosmopolitanism, and Geographical Imaginations.”

To introduce his talk, Warf relayed an anecdote from a trip to Spain a few years back. At a public restroom, he noted a graffito’s declaration, “I poop on flags and live without borders.” Despite the vulgarity of the first part, the sentiment that followed—living a life without borders—established a current line of thought for Warf that quickly evolved from an “interest” to a “passion”: attending to, and advocating for, the ongoing transition from a nationalistic consciousness to one more “cosmopolitan.”

Warf follows J.A. Hobson in seeing nationalism, the ideological counterpart to the nation-state, as a way for elites to control culturally diverse, and often times democratically inclined, populations. For nationalism to work, the nation-state must sustain an illusion of homogeneity by covering over differences, particularly of class, and “suturing together” its diverse populations by means of narratives of mythic origins. Because nationalism is now so deeply “sedimented” within our consciousness, it is now synonymous with “society.” Nationalism celebrates the nation-state and its boundaries as “natural,” not as actually being socially and historically constructed.

For Warf, it is somewhat ironic that nationalism, for all its alleged “naturalness,” must constantly be drilled into people’s heads—via pledges of allegiance and national anthems—preferably when they are young. Nationalism must be performed repeatedly to exist.

Although nationalism has served progressive roles, its star has faded. By the 20th century, nationalism had transformed itself into “an uncritical celebration of self,” with Nazi Germany...
as its zenith (or nadir). It is now “virtually inseparable” from militarism; at its core is a “culture of fear.” “Irredeemably xenophobic and chauvinistic,” nationalism uses “love of country” as a disguise for “fear of others.” It creates the sharply bifurcated opposition of us vs. them, where the “them” are dehumanized “others.”

And nationalism does not reside solely among the zealots: for ordinary people, one’s “concentric circles of compassion”—a compassion that begins with self and nuclear family and then extends outwards—stop at the borders of one’s country. With such a truncated sense of compassion, for example, Americans can acknowledge that 3,000 people died at the World Trade Center on 9/11 while ignoring that on the same day (and every day) 30,000 children around the world died of malnutrition, disease, and neglect.

Warf’s alternative to nationalism is “cosmopolitanism.” Although the word has broad applications, Warf is interested in a quite narrow meaning of the word. Cosmopolitanism

- seeks to uncouple ethics from location (one is obligated to humanity as a whole, not just to people in a specified place)
- acknowledges the inherent worthiness of everyone
- uses all human beings as its point of departure

Cosmopolitanism does not recognize any moral significance in geographical proximity; it does not fall into the trap of “spatial determinism” which privileges the lives of those who live nearby. It recognizes only one, world-wide, moral community. While the primary emotions associated with nationalism are pride and fear, the emotions associated with cosmopolitanism are empathy and respect, neither of which declines over distances.

Some adherents of cosmopolitanism, such as Peter Singer, extend their circles of compassion onto the animal world. While reading animal psychologist Irene Pepperberg’s account of her language and learning experiments with the African Grey parrot, Alex (Alex and Me), Warf immediately converted to vegetarianism when he ran across the following sentence, “Animals know more than we think, and they think more than we know.”

“Nationalism is an infantile sickness. It is the measles of the human race.”

– Albert Einstein

Historical figures with cosmopolitan bents include the ancient Greek, Diogenes the Cynic (“I am a citizen of the world”); the 16th century Dominican priest Bartolomé de las Casas; Immanuel Kant, the first to theorize an ethics outside of the nation-state and who argued for a voluntary world federation of states; Karl Marx; and Albert Einstein who stated in 1934, “Nationalism is an infantile sickness. It is the measles of the human race.” Moreover, there are also many varieties of cosmopolitanism: religious, communist, neoliberal, and progressive.

Warf, however, is more interested in our contemporary cosmopolitanism, one that is developing within our era of globalization. Although he doesn’t see the nation-state disappearing any time soon, he does recognize that new manifestations of reflexivity, identity, and belonging are developing through the “time-space compressions” of globalization. Noting Bob Jessup’s thoughts on the “hollowing out of the nation-state,” Warf sees “the nation-state losing its power to supra-national and subnational powers.” Just as economic structures underwent drastic changes from the transition from city-state to nation-state, so too are we in the midst of changing from the nation-state to a globalized economy.

Warf acknowledged, and then rebutted, some standard criticisms of cosmopolitanism:

- Cosmopolitans are often accused of being dreamy, impractical utopians, elites at universities, and rootless people who belong everywhere—and consequently nowhere.
Such descriptions, however, ignore a great body of literature—in geography, sociology, and anthropology—that has looked at how “space and identity are shot through with one another”; they are “co-constitutive.” Identities, moreover, are not fixed, frozen, and given, as nationalists would have it, but are open, porous, and malleable. “We are local and global simultaneously.”

- Cosmopolitans are accused of being more interested in people in distant places, not in their own back yards. Warf considers this a “misplaced objection”; after all, cosmopolitans have to live somewhere, too. In the words of Daniele Archibugi, “To express solidarity for distant groups does not mean denying it to those who live in our own neighborhood. Loyalty to humanity as a whole does not deprive us of loyalty and empathy for our neighbors nearby.” In a similar vein, some argue that cosmopolitanism and nationalism can indeed be complementary, and that there can be some sort of “cosmopolitan patriotism” as promulgated by Kwame Appiah.

- Cosmopolitanism is simply a disguise for multinational corporations as they seamlessly integrate all the countries of the world into one market: “we are all brothers and sisters united under the commodity.” Such arguments, however, ignore cosmopolitanism’s moral critique, its emphasis on compassion, its concern for Rawlsian justice. Cosmopolitan writing does not focus on the wealthy and the advantaged, but on the subaltern and the disadvantaged. Its starting point is governance and civil society, and is more interested in transnational networks such as Amnesty International and Doctors without Borders rather than transnational corporations. Cosmopolitanism relies upon a “relational ontology of space.” It is not interested in isolated, discreet places, but in places that are always enmeshed in flows and lines of communications. “Distant strangers are not that distant; we are all enmeshed in networks of obligations.”

For Warf, cosmopolitanism is no longer idle theory, but is actually working itself out through the very practicalities of governance. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, national laws and regulations began to displace local laws and regulations, primarily “to control the anarchical tendencies of capitalism.” Although the next logical step would be the segue from national laws to globalized ones, Warf is not really interested in the establishment of one world government. Cosmopolitans prefer, like Kant, to see sovereignty disbursed along a continuum so that one single stratum of governance is not dominant and that there is a system of checks and balances. Although the United Nations has plenty of problems, it still comes closest to Kant’s vision of a voluntary world federation of states. The UN’s 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for instance, transfers the localized results of the Nuremberg trials to an international level; it affirms civil rights regardless of where one was born.

To conclude, Warf asks if we want to choose a narrow nationalism that looks backwards, constricts interactions, and inculcates fear, or an expansive cosmopolitanism that looks forward, extends the circle of compassion, and encourages empathy. The bumper sticker on Warf’s car most likely answers his own rhetorical question: “Global Citizen: Love Knows No Boundaries.”

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