Reconciling cosmopolitan theory and policy practice? Responsible states as a transitional category

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Abstract:

The idea of a responsible cosmopolitan state (RCS) represents a recent attempt to reconcile the utopianism of cosmopolitan political theory and the practical constraints arising from the current realities of politics among territorial and largely self-interested states. I show in this chapter that the neorealist and/or geopolitical challenge rests on a misconception about what cosmopolitanism is meant to provide, because immediate practical advice is only a part of what normative political theory may bring to the table. Besides the notion of self-interest, which can be interpreted in different ways, it is mainly the action-modifying role of norms (especially international/supranational law) which may gradually change the game. Since the sustenance of state capacities is often preconditioned by events which take place beyond state borders, shared rules of conduct allow for more effective coordination in cases where collective action is required. Although the idea of an RCS primarily targets foreign policy priorities of smaller/weaker states (not-great-powers), it may turn out that collective action problems arising from the empirical realities of the 21st century increasingly put great powers under pressure to accept such self-imposed constraints and comply with them. In the final part of the chapter, however, I explain why this 'cosmopolitan optimism' needs to be aware of its own limitations, singling out the problems of the internal motivation of actors in world politics and the deeper meaning of sovereignty which precludes an easy switch to the language of dispersed, pooled, or relational sovereignty. I conclude by arguing that if we are to take cosmopolitan ideals seriously, the RCS most likely represents a transitional stage on the route towards a centralised global political authority.

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Cosmopolitanism; utopianism; realism; responsible states; motivation; sovereignty; global political authority;

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1. Introduction

The academic philosophical discourse on cosmopolitanism, global (in)justice, global democracy, and countless global (or even extra-terrestrial) challenges to humanity – in short, global political theory (Brooks 2020; Held and Maffettone 2017) – may leave the uninitiated wondering about its practical relevance. For no matter how inventive, well-argued, or strongly motivated these scholarly contributions are, one can hardly miss their remoteness from what is realistically expectable in world politics. Take, for instance, Thomas Pogge's well-known arguments on behalf of 'minor reforms' of international law as first steps towards eliminating global injustices. Pogge suggests

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abandoning certain privileges granted to governments of internationally recognised sovereign states, such as the right to use natural resources found in their territory as they see fit, the right to borrow money from abroad, or the right to purchase arms for purposes of 'self-defence' (Pogge 2005, 109; 2008, 119). On the one hand, Pogge's appeal is realistic in the sense that it does not demand large-scale societal transformations – all we need, at least for starters, are a couple of tweaks in extant international law, plus, arguably, the annual global transfer of funds from the rich to the poor – a couple of hundred billion dollars, perhaps – to kick-start the eradication of world poverty (Pogge 2010, 54). On the other hand, it is unlikely that the very actors in question – sovereign states, among them especially the great powers – will voluntarily saw off the branch they have been sitting on quite comfortably for decades. What, then, is there to say about ambitious cosmopolitan proposals which are part and parcel of the work of professional political philosophers, such as global equality of opportunity (Moellendorf 2006; Caney 2005), open borders (Carens 2013), or global climate justice (Caney 2020)? What is the point and purpose of academic normative theorising about world politics? The kind of scepticism voiced among others by Bohumil Doboš (see chapter 2.3) in part feeds off precisely such kind of practical concerns.

The present chapter generally assumes that this criticism may be based on a misconception about what cosmopolitanism, understood as a broad moral conviction grounding a varied set of approaches to political theorising about world politics, is meant to provide and achieve. My implicit point is thus that cosmopolitan political theorising has some value independent of whether it can offer decision-makers neat what-to-do checklists, or whether it has an immediate response to the realist 'objection from the existence of great powers'. Moreover, the idea of a responsible cosmopolitan state (henceforth also RCS) promises a fruitful middle ground between utopian theorising and acquiescence to the status quo. It does not follow that the RCS is the magic bullet cosmopolitan theory can easily fire into political practice. I will, however, try to show that a perspective that is neither missionary nor thoroughgoingly sceptical is precisely the in-between approach that philosophical reflection on (world) politics should be looking for if it is to retain both a critical edge and practical relevance. Because the theorist's point of view is necessarily different from that of the decision-maker, she might notice things which elude those acting in the line of duty. One of my partial goals in this chapter is to show how a set of practically oriented considerations related to responsible cosmopolitan states nevertheless invites more ambitious utopian theorising through the back door.

2. What is the point of theorising about world politics?

To better appreciate what contribution to political practice cosmopolitan theorists may be expected to provide, it is worth discussing what political theory is *capable* of providing in the first place. (1) For many (Rawls 1999, 136–37), it must aspire to identify the desired goals of political activity (*what we ought [not] to strive for*) and the corresponding criteria of the evaluation of such activity (*which types of actions, structures, or institutions are right/wrong, just/unjust etc.*). Here, it is at its most utopian, not only envisioning what is the desired institutional framework, but also criticising the status quo for not living up to the ideal. This goal-setting task often requires (2) conceptual investigation; that is, the clearing up of confusions about the meanings of basic political concepts and their relationship to political reality, as well as the justification of which of the competing interpretations of a given concept is preferable. Notions such as freedom, peace, justice, solidarity, security, and universal prosperity would surely receive approval from all sides of the political spectrum, yet it is doubtful the meanings ascribed to them by the respective actors would be equivalent. The same goes for their opposites such as injustice or insecurity. At the very least, then, political theory helps to avoid talking past each other; in the best scenario, conceptual investigation discovers reasons to prefer one interpretation of a concept over others. (3) Clearing up the meanings

of concepts facilitates thinking about specific institutional arrangements. These will still be idealised in the sense that although they are meant to orientate our actions in the real world, they do not constitute pieces of immediate political/policy advice. The idea of relational sovereignty which underpins the concept of the RCS could be understood as such a type of institutional arrangement.

(4) Somewhat less obviously, political theory might or might not be capable of recommending what we should do *here and now*. This is less obvious because this type of immediate practical advice requires incorporating at least some features of the current world which would arguably not be present in the idealised state of society as theorised under (1), (2) or (3) (such as poverty, exploitation, selfishness, power inequality, weakness of will, and a host of other 'bad facts'; cf. (D. Estlund 2019)). Moreover, theorists offering such advice must be aware of the hard, factual constraints of political action, such as the widely diverging interests, preferences, and identities of major players in global politics, or (less obviously) the dictates of international law (let me call these 'constraining facts'). Accordingly, this approach requires a different type of knowledge than the kind political theorists usually possess; competence in matters of a great many social sciences, the humanities, and possibly also the natural sciences may prove necessary for sound political advice.

It might be objected that the way political theorists understand their vocation is hardly relevant for practical politics. However, the struggle over meanings of words is central to both worlds. When the prime minister of an EU member state announced that the future would belong to *illiberal, national democracy*, as opposed to declining *liberal democracy* (Orbán 2014), he probably had in mind particular images of what those notions stood for, and the fact that those images are still shared by many voters helps him stay in power (and alienate much of the rest of the EU). Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union states that the EU is based on the values of human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity, and so on; yet what these words entail is not quite clear.[2] Does 'equality between women and men' require legislated quotas on party candidate lists, or even reserved seats in legislative bodies? What follows from the non-discrimination principle in matters of hiring? Does human dignity prohibit lending oneself to being tossed by other people for fun (and being paid handsomely for it)?[3] The related political action often takes intellectual inspiration from seemingly distant philosophical debates. As students of the history of political thought have amply demonstrated, it is through the reconceptualisation of basic elements of political language which are employed to describe and evaluate the social reality that political theory has participated in real-world social and political struggles (Skinner et al. 2002).

3. Toning down cosmopolitan idealism: the idea of a responsible cosmopolitan state

Moving from tasks (1) to (4) outlined in the previous section involves increasing attention to bad and/or constraining facts which accompany real-world political action.[4] Insofar as cosmopolitanism wants to be not only philosophically true but also practically useful, it needs to tone down its idealist pretensions and take seriously world politics as it is – including the persevering role of territorial states. This is the perennial lesson of political realism, whatever particular shape it acquires: ignoring how the world is, on behalf of narratives about how it should be, will likely result in misleading guidelines for political action.

Interestingly, the global scope of many looming threats and challenges has led many cosmopolitan political theorists to develop normatively highly ambitious visions of how global political

[2] See https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:12012M002&from=EN

[3] See e.g. the discussion in Rosen (2012, chap. 2).

[4] This is the prominent understanding of the distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory, which is an important element of the methodology of political theory; see Stemplowska and Swift (2012).

institutions *ought to* be organised. A wealth of distinct models of different kinds have been devised by political theorists, to the effect that even the typologies of these positions do not overlap (Macdonald 2017; Marchetti 2012; Kuyper 2020). For example, a lot of energy has been invested into exploring what democracy might mean and require beyond the state, ranging from the idea of a *global demos* (Valentini 2014) through multi-level cosmopolitan citizenship (D. Archibugi 2008) to functionally defined transnational *demoi*, basically a flexible set of stakeholders whose composition varies according to the issue at stake (Besson 2009; Macdonald 2008). Others are less enamoured with the prospects of democracy and invest their hopes in the cosmopolitan potential of international and/or supranational law, be it the pluralist, polycentric narrative (Krisch 2010) or the integrative promise of global constitutionalism (Belov 2018; Dunoff and Trachtman 2009). Still others believe in the legitimising capacity of supranational or global *public reason*, thus putting into use a central concept of much of contemporary philosophical thinking about legitimacy (Sadurski 2015). Finally, output-oriented visions of the transnational cooperation of technocratic elites should be mentioned, due to their importance for thinking about the EU as the archetype of governing beyond the state (Majone et al. 1996; Scharpf 1999).

Note that the 'loser' is almost always state sovereignty, together with national allegiances and the territorial demarcation of political communities. This is what makes such visions utopian, for they disregard the continuing capacity of states to alter the availability of such trajectories, not least by reclaiming sovereignty (think of Brexit), as well as the emotional patriotic bond cultivated by the states among their citizenries. In order to remain practically (politically) relevant for the here and now, cosmopolitan political theory must find a way of reconciling its moral ideals to world politics as it is. In other words, if it is to provide plausible and sound political guidelines, it needs to realistically come to terms with the continuing importance of territorial states for world politics. The recent turn in global political theory to the idea of a 'responsible cosmopolitan state' (Brown 2011), 'cosmopolitan responsible state' (Beardsworth and Shapcott 2019, 8–9), 'statist cosmopolitanism' (Léa Ypi 2008) is meant to achieve precisely that.[5] Upon suitable adjustments to their normative equipment, including foreign policy goals, states are potentially the primary *agents* of cosmopolitan political goals, even though they may be joined by a plethora of other actors, depending on the issue at hand and the resulting constellation of interests ('stakes') (Daniele Archibugi and Held 2011; Léa Ypi 2012). The idea of an RCS is primarily aimed at smaller and mid-sized states which are not directly involved in great-power politics. As such, they can be expected to have more significant room for the incorporation of elements of cosmopolitan political morality and the corresponding practical goals in their behaviour in world politics.

The next two sections are devoted, first, to explaining how a political theory of RCSs may help deflect the neorealist geopolitical challenge, and, second, to discussing certain blind spots of the concept of RCSs itself, as seen against the theoretical background outlined in the previous sections. I should emphasise that my own sympathies ultimately lie with a certain conception of a cosmopolitan state, even though I am probably less sanguine than most theorists sympathetic to the model about its immediate practical prospects (Dufek 2013; Dufek and Mochtak 2019). As in many other spheres of human activity, not all good things necessarily go together in world politics. At the same time, I see no reason to believe that good things can never happen in tandem, as Doboš's (neo)realist geopolitics seems to imply (see chapter 2.3). As William Scheuerman (2011) has stressed, the realist tradition in international relations harbours much more progressive musings than the neorealist narrative wants to allow. One important motivation for this belief is the awareness of collective action problems to which I shall keep coming back.

[5] Compare also the related legal/constitutionalist-centred perspective in Somek (2014)

4. RCSs against neorealist reductionism

Combining the first three tasks of political thinking discussed in section 2, global political theory may be said to be primarily concerned with the question of 'how best to design the fundamental institutions through which political power is constituted, controlled and distributed within global society,' or 'which existing such institutions are worthy of ongoing support, and on what basis' (Macdonald 2017, 76). These are, of course, *normative* questions, but that is hardly something to be ashamed of. When neorealist geopolitics offers political or policy advice, it does so on the basis of its own preferred normative criteria, these telling neorealist theorists which of the myriad of bare facts about world politics to prioritise, or at least take into account. Neorealist geopolitics thus responds to the very same question as the most utopian of cosmopolitan visions; it just employs idiosyncratic standards with respect to what is a good or convincing answer. In the most general terms, these standards amount to peculiar interpretations of *rational self-interest*. The problem is not with self-interest as such, because the notion is an empty vessel which needs to be filled with content if it is to be analytically and/or normatively useful. The neorealist is right to the extent that cosmopolitan guidelines of political action are currently unlikely to be shared by the decisive actors of world politics. However, this is not an ontological or even anthropological fact: we *know* that the interests, preferences, and identities of collective actors can and do change, so that what is deemed 'rational' and 'irrational' by them changes accordingly. I do not think there is anything incredible about this claim; if there was, then constructivism would not be a thing in the study of international relations or elsewhere.[6]

Accordingly, to claim that the conduct of states follows solely rational self-interest and imply that self-interest necessarily results in power conflicts is to overlook the modifying role played by norms. Prominent among them is international and/or supranational law, including rapidly expanding areas like human rights law, trade law, and environmental law, as well as the more established ones (e.g. the law of the sea).[7] It is to be expected that outer space will also be increasingly covered by an ever denser network of international and/or supranational legal regulations, perhaps more overtly imbued with cosmopolitan intent. I am far from arguing that international law will solve the problem of power politics any time soon; that would certainly be naïve. At the same time, it would be a mistake to assume that international law which imposes on its subjects obligations which are in principle enforceable is completely inert with respect to the subjects' conduct in world politics. International law in some form or other has accompanied inter-society relations since ancient times (Kingsbury and Straumann 2010; Shaw 2008, chap. 1), which means that it has always provided an alternative normative framework of conduct to that of rational self-interest understood in the (neo)realist geopolitical way (that is, as pertaining to actors who look solely for unilateral gains and benefits, judged against the background of a zero-sum view of world politics). Pointing out instances of states' ignorance of international law on behalf of their selfish interests may ultimately undermine the sceptic's position, because it is not difficult to identify instances of their submitting to the values embodied in international law *in defiance* of immediate unilateral gains (trade law is a textbook example here). At the very least, the very fact of the existence of impartial rules of conduct, which often entail penalties or punishments for noncompliance, becomes an input to the calculation of self-interested gains. Put more ambitiously, rather than merely 'a simple set of rules', international law may grow into 'a culture in the broadest sense in that it constitutes a method of communicating

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[6] See prototypically Wendt (1992).

[7] Those embedded in the tradition of Roman law might want to distinguish between public and private variants of international law; I do not think this affects my explication in any way. For reasons of simplicity, I will use the term 'international law' as covering all the modalities of extra-statal law, including 'supranational', 'cosmopolitan', 'global' etc. law.

claims, counter-claims, expectations and anticipations as well as providing a framework for assessing and prioritising such demands' (Shaw 2018, 67).

One core motivation for perceptiveness towards extra-statal sources of norms of conduct is the realisation that the sustenance of state capacities themselves is preconditioned by events which take place beyond state borders. The institutional structure of which international law is a central part renders these events at least partly predictable, allowing individual actors to adjust to expected scenarios.[8] Perhaps even more importantly, shared rules of conduct allow for more effective coordination in cases where *collective action* is required. In particular, if there is disagreement about the required, permitted, or prohibited course of action, and if the action that is permitted or required cannot be pursued unilaterally if the given goals are to be achieved, impersonal rules may greatly help coordinate on an effective response. Climate change or the threat of asteroid impact are paradigmatic examples of existential import; for many states, however, more 'mundane' issues such as mass migration, rules of world trade, intellectual property rights, or the impact of global financial transactions raise more immediate concerns.

If a positive impact is to be achieved, then international law obviously requires that the most powerful actors accept it as authoritative and take seriously the resulting duties and limitations on unilateral conduct that it imposes – in other words, international law needs to enjoy sociological legitimacy. Rejecting that this is how things work in world politics represents another piece of the neorealist geopolitical challenge. However, scholars of neither international law nor world politics unanimously share this scepticism. It might be the case that less powerful or outright weak states have more direct interest in there being external constraints on the conduct of the powerful,[9] which again renders weaker states as primary candidates for the role of agents of cosmopolitan political morality. Whether great powers share this interest or not is a *contingent* rather than conceptual matter. Accordingly, the cosmopolitan argument is that collective action problems arising from empirical realities of the 21st century increasingly put great powers under pressure to accept such self-imposed constraints and comply with them.

5. Pitfalls of bringing the state back in global political theory

Some political theorists have insisted that states as we know them – territorially based, claiming jurisdiction over their territory, bonded by common feelings (of nationality or otherwise) – need to remain the primary actors of world politics as well as the central subject matter of political theorising, at least for the foreseeable future. However, there is a decisive difference between, on the one hand, the work of John Rawls (1999), David Miller (2007), Michael Walzer (1994), Robert Dahl (1999), Michael Blake (Michael Blake 2013) and others, and the concept of a responsible cosmopolitan state on the other, in that the former never construed states as primarily efficient means to achieving cosmopolitan (non-statist) goals. It might ultimately be true that even the former are susceptible to the cosmopolitan label, insofar as the moral egalitarian plateau which Western political theory has almost universally accepted implies that 'we are all cosmopolitans now' (M. Blake 2013; Kymlicka 2002, 3–4). While the positions of Rawls et al. are normally labelled as 'statist' or 'nationalist' to mark their opposition to cosmopolitan political theory (G. Brock 2009; Hutchings 1999), their theories do indeed incorporate fundamental elements of universal (= cosmopolitan) moral concern such as the

[8] Making it possible for an agent to form stable expectations about the likely behaviour of others, as well as about *their* expectations regarding one's own behaviour, is perhaps the greatest benefit of stable social rules in general. See e.g. Bicchieri (2006).

[9] The *Melian dialogue* as recounted in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* is a classic example.

importance of basic human needs or rejection of economic exploitation between countries.[10] But their 'cosmopolitanism' is reluctant and mostly forms an appendage to essentially particularistic normative-political visions.

In contrast, for RCSs, cosmopolitan values, principles, and goals are paramount, with cosmopolitan states taking up the role of the foremost agents of cosmopolitan morality. The suggestion that states could become the flag-bearers of ideals which seemingly contradict the nature of sovereign stateness indeed represents a major change of focus in a literature which used to rather begrudgingly accept the state as an unfortunate remnant of a particularistic past, one which needs to be dealt with by non-ideal theory. I count myself among those who applaud the shift in focus, for any political theory which aims to guide political action needs to accommodate, in a *non-ad hoc manner*, the actor around whom the current architecture of the world order has been erected. However, even though this is a move in the right theoretical direction, certain questions linger which indicate that there is still a lot of work ahead for both cosmopolitan theory and practice. In the remainder of this section, I discuss two such issue areas: the motivational plausibility of the RCS model, and the kind of reconceptualization of sovereignty the model officially requires. In the concluding section, I explain why RCSs represent, in my view, a transition stage on the route towards global political authority.

5.1. Motivational issues

The trouble with reasonably functioning democratic countries is that decision-makers *qua* political representatives are normally expected to be sufficiently (if not fully) responsive to the interests, preferences, identities etc. of those they represent – that is, the citizenry at large, or some subset thereof. Also, they are normally held accountable for their actions by those represented, via elections or otherwise. The problem should be obvious: all the talk about cosmopolitan sentiments, responsibilities, or duties of states may quickly hit a wall of self-regarding demands and preferences on the part of the citizenry. Suppose one such cosmopolitan duty concerned the accommodation of migrants from poor countries, theorised by some cosmopolitans as a part of the topic of global (in)justice (Carens 2013). It seems likely that any government which significantly opened its borders in compliance with these moral ideals (think of EU-type 'redistributive' immigration policies on steroids) would face a backlash from citizens. Brexit could also be construed as an example of a momentous domestically-driven political decision which rejected the bindingness of cosmopolitan values and universal responsibility upon which the EU's identity supposedly rests (Beck and Grande 2004).[11] The crucial point, however, is that governments which disregarded the will of the country's citizens would, as governments of democratic countries, be acting *illegitimately*.[12]

The more ambitious the cosmopolitan goals are, the less likely it is that democratic countries will be able to play their part on the basis of their internal motivational resources. Also, the *more* likely it is that these goals, as translated into policy priorities, will trigger a backlash of particularistic sentiments which are still deeply embedded among citizens: they are '*felt* and *lived* rather than learnt' (Ulaş 2017, 666 emphasis in original) or theorised. On the face of it, the RCS vision cannot do without the systematic, intensive cosmopolitan education of citizens. But we know that the EU itself struggles with creating the kind of shared identity which would ensure pan-European loyalty and solidarity even

[10] In this sense, they must not be confused with the 'everyday nationalism' and state-worshipping which politicians so often use to mobilise the masses.

[11] Compare also Article 2 of the (consolidated) Treaty on European Union.

[12] For instance, the Czech constitution (Art. 65[2]) states that the President of the country can be tried for treason, which 'is deemed to mean any conduct of the President of the Republic directed against the *sovereignty* and *integrality* [sic] of the Republic as well as against the democratic order of the republic.' Italics added; see https://public.psp.cz/en/docs/laws/constitution.html

in times of crises. Yet the centralisation – here, Europeanisation – of school curricula remains a highly sensitive topic among EU member states, seemingly infeasible in the short- and mid-term. Although there might be objective moral and factual reasons for wanting to go the RCS route, this is still quite remote from citizens *internalising* these reasons so that they inform and direct their deliberations and decisions on difficult political topics. In more technical terms, *justifying reasons* are not necessarily also *motivating reasons*, which constitutes a problem for non-ideal theory aiming to guide us here and now (Alvarez 2020). At the very least, cosmopolitan education is a lengthy process with delayed payoffs. Any state which aspires to set the avant-garde cosmopolitan pace *and* wants to remain a democracy needs to grapple with the challenge of adequate education, preferably in some level of coordination with other similarly minded actors.

5.2. Which Sovereignty?

It might be objected that while I show some sensitivity to variations in the globalist position and the numerous novel conceptions of democracy which accompany global democratic visions, I do little justice to what the notion of a 'sovereign state' might stand for. Indeed, up to now I have been rather silent about the conceptual background of a responsible cosmopolitan state. *Sovereignty* understood as the highest, ultimate, supreme authority in a given realm (usually the territory of a state) has long been the bogeyman of not only cosmopolitan political thought. As such, it has been accordingly either roundly rejected (Arendt 1961, 163; Maritain 1951, 49–53), or variously disaggregated and retheorised so that it could become compatible with cosmopolitan goals *without* the need for a simultaneous global replication of sovereign stateness (Caney 2005, chap. 5; Keating 2001). In international legal and political practice, a counterpart development resulted in the *Responsibility to Protect* doctrine (R2P) at the beginning of the new millenium, which is often understood as opening a new chapter in the history of state sovereignty (Evans 2008; Orford 2011). Also, the political trajectory of the European Union has been hailed as evidence of the viability of a post-sovereign (post-national, post-statist...) political order in which sovereignty still has its place, albeit in a dispersed, pooled, relational etc. form (Pogge 1992; Habermas 1998; Beardsworth and Shapcott 2019).

However, post-sovereign approaches to sovereignty rest on a misconception about what the point of the concept is. Cosmopolitans tend to equate sovereignty with *state sovereignty* and argue that in its 'traditional' form, it is neither empirically adequate as a description of the current realities of the globalised world nor morally sustainable once balanced against cosmopolitan ideals such as human rights or global justice. But such a construal of sovereignty takes the concept as representing some quantifiable good that real-world entities such as states may possess in different degrees. The quality of 'being sovereign' would then imply both exclusive possession of the good inwards ('internal sovereignty') and the unconstrained ability to express and perhaps realise state goals outwards ('external sovereignty'). This understandably triggers both descriptive and normative criticism of the concept of sovereignty. But the victory comes cheap, as none of the assumptions are conceptually necessary. Sovereignty neither describes or requires empirically or morally unconstrained action, nor represents a good that can be variously added to, subtracted from, or distributed among actors, nor pertains exclusively to states. But I do not follow those who speak about *different types* of sovereignty either (Krasner 1999). Rather, I suggest understanding the concept as capturing a particularly modern way of allocating the authority to set up binding criteria of right and wrong political action, of desirable and undesirable political goals (Belling 2019). Under this construal, sovereignty presupposes a *subject* which articulates the desired criteria. This is why the concept of sovereignty has been so amenable to *democratic* interpretations, which in turn renders the idea of *popular sovereignty* among the core defining elements of democratic political rule. Precisely because a democratic people is sovereign, it

can give unto itself the basic rules of social cooperation (i.e., the constitution, in liberal democracies at least).

Seen from this angle, calls for a dispersion of sovereignty away from the state level leave political theory with few options, because we still need to identify the subject of sovereignty. (A) Insofar as cosmopolitan values, principles, and goals are to be retained, one possibility is to accept the normative superiority of a cosmopolitan moral order which precedes the existence of individual political units and largely determines the criteria of right and wrong political action. Since the mid-20th century, the prominent expression of such higher order has been *human rights*, which are usually networked to a host of further cosmopolitan ideals such as fair treatment or equality of opportunity. However, human rights never come into the human world as some unchangeable *eidos*. Even as positivised *international human rights* (Donnelly 2013; Alston and Goodman 2013), they need to be *interpreted*: that is, their meaning and content have to be specified and applied to particular cases. For our present purposes, this means that whoever provides an authoritative interpretation of human rights becomes the sovereign in the realm of human rights, and, by extension, in any realm where human rights themselves are supposed to possess supreme normative authority.[13] (B) The other option is to supplement the 'cosmopolitisation' of political morality with an analogous move on the *demos* side, so that the link between legitimacy and democracy remains strong. This is where philosophical attempts to substantiate the possibility (or even current existence) of a *global demos* find their sweet spot, for they help maintain the link between cosmopolitan moral goals and a global subject which is supposed to articulate them.

Nonetheless it should be clear that whichever conception of democratic subjectivity is ultimately preferred, it will not be easily incompatible with the idea of a responsible cosmopolitan state – for the simple reason that the point of cosmopolitan political morality is to move away from the state level as the decisive locus of authority. What matters, then, is that RCSs are required to become *cosmopolitan* states, rather than them remaining as cosmopolitan *states*. This means that they would become primarily accountable to guardians of cosmopolitan goals and values, rather than directly the wishes and demands of their citizens. In turn, the motivation problem kicks in again. It seems to me that a possible way out is to reduce the normative expectations placed on the shoulders of RCSs; that is, to admit a healthy dose of non-utopianism (realism, if you wish) into cosmopolitan political morality, as discussed in section 3.

6. Conclusion: responsible cosmopolitan states as a transitional stage

Assuming we are aware of the obstacles discussed in the previous section, and accordingly avoid overloading RCSs with unrealistic expectations, small and mid-sized states may indeed become key agents of a different future for humankind. There is a strong constructivist element in this vision, because it takes as granted the malleability of actors in world politics (Dufek 2013, 204). The idea of an RCS can then inform reflection on further salient questions of world politics, such as possible ways of improving legitimacy in various areas of governance beyond state borders. Frameworks of decision-making regarding the space-policy challenges of orbital debris removal, planetary defence against asteroid and comet impact, and space exploration and the exploitation of space resources – an area where advanced science and politics inevitably meet – are one such fruitful area of research (Boháček, Dufek, and Schmidt 2021). But it is crucial not to lose track of the larger cosmopolitan goals which transcend the individual political strategies of a few countries. As students, analysts, and theorists of

[13] Hence, the polemical label of (international) *juristocracy* (Hirschl 2004), for courts and international courts are precisely those bodies which make such authoritative interpretations.

world politics, we cannot but remain at least partly utopian (idealistic) in an important sense which I want to specify in this concluding section.

The cosmopolitan ideal certainly does not consist in a bunch of lesser actors engaging in a progressive yet ultimately futile sideshow. There must be the aspiration to make international law truly cosmopolitan, and to turn over strongly self-regarding great powers to the party of the good. At the very least, the future of humanity must be envisioned by cosmopolitans as one inhabited by political bodies that are in their majority aware of their cosmopolitan responsibilities/duties and willing to discharge these duties, as well as assisted in this by enforceable legal or political norms. In short, the ideal points to a kind of *system* of responsible cosmopolitan states which perseveres over time and does not fall prey to purely self-regarding adventures of a random great power.

If we are after such *robustness*, however, then a host of intriguing questions about the shape of such a system arise. Suppose for the sake of argument that cosmopolitan innovators are, within some reasonable timeframe, successful in diffusing their values and motivations across the globe, so that the desired cosmopolitan norms have been internalised by a great many actors. It is plausible to assume that the problem of collective action, especially as regards the provision of public goods and the related threat of free riding, will thus have been mostly solved (Gaus 2008, 84, 102). Nonetheless, there are *practical/pragmatic* reasons why a world populated by responsible cosmopolitan states remains vulnerable to a tilt towards a world-state. For one, the transactional costs of exchanging and pooling knowledge and executive capacities among formally independent actors who otherwise share the same set of cosmopolitan values and goals come as unnecessary and even counterproductive, when compared to the globally centralised alternative (Ulaş 2017, 667). Moreover, types of action which require concerted effort on the part of many parties – the bundle of climate change goals representing a fitting example – seem to call for the deliberate *creation* of a centralised coordinating authority, so that at least a part of the epistemic, administrative, and enforcement burden can be shifted to another agent.

The idea of a centralised global political authority with legitimate coercive power usually brings disquiet to political theorists. Accordingly, one major motivation behind the sophisticated visions of global political rule mentioned in section 3 is precisely to avoid the world-statist spectre, which seems to threaten global despotism, global paternalism, and other bad stuff. I have argued in earlier texts that as long as such cosmopolitan normative visions are morally highly ambitious, the world-statist alternative seems practically more robust and conceptually more consistent than numerous multi-level visions of global rule (Dufek 2013; 2018; Scheuerman 2011; 2014). It is worth noting that besides normative reasons (Cabrera 2004; Lea Ypi 2013), also certain empirical trends and fairly uncontroversial assumptions about the nature of the actors of world politics have been cited by proponents of the world-statist alternative. For example, the legal theorist Joel Trachtman argues that because of the increasing density and scope of international law, international organisations will gradually take up and perform governmental functions. Functional necessities arising from globalisation and transnationalisation render such development 'necessary' in Trachtman's view, which is why he thinks that 'the future of international law is global government' (Trachtman 2013, 3).[14]

I am not trying to make a prediction about the future ala Trachtman or Wendt. My point is more modest and takes us back to the roles political theory can play, as discussed in section 2. Earlier I pointed out that the idea of a responsible cosmopolitan state allows political theorists to keep

[14] The modern *locus classicus* concerning the empirical inevitability of the emergence of a world-state is Wendt (2003).

providing normative guidelines while staying in close touch with present-day political realities. As it turns out, however, there are reasons to believe that, normatively speaking, an RCS is mainly a *transitional stage* towards a globally centralised political authority, rather than an end in itself. After all, RCSs need to tie their foreign policy to some set of criteria which transcend the bare facticity of world politics. Even though it might be found awkward as regards the provision of useful policy/political advice here and now, (cosmopolitan) political theory remains unmatched in the task of exploring the limits of the politically possible. If what I say here holds water, then the 'practical' idea of a responsible cosmopolitan state inevitably contains the seeds of highly utopian political thinking.

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