

Politically Constructed Solidarity: The Idea of a Cosmopolitan Avant-garde

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1. Solidarity and the avant-garde

One of the most forceful critiques against the cosmopolitan defence of global distributive justice emphasizes its weak motivational force in the absence of a trans-national ethos of solidarity (Lenard, this issue). This critique relies on a contrast between the relationships of solidarity supporting generous redistributive schemes within the nation-state and the absence of an analogous disposition between individuals in the world at large. In response, this paper draws attention to the politically constructed nature of solidarity even within the nation-state. Relationships of solidarity, so the argument goes, do not necessarily precede the recognition of moral obligations between fellow-citizens. They may also result from the political processes conferring to such individual moral obligations an institutional shape.

In attempting to further articulate these claims, the paper introduces the notion of a “cosmopolitan avant-garde” to refer to those political agents responsible for constructing solidarity within particular political communities. It starts by exploring how one should understand the idea of an “avant-garde”, its relevance in art and the analogies between avant-garde movements in art and politics in using available resources in tradition in order to promote solidarity in society. It then discusses who might constitute an avant-garde “cosmopolitan” movement and how its civic and political action might affect the rest of the citizen body thus gaining support for cosmopolitan transformations. I try to emphasize the role of grass-root organizations and trans-national advocacy networks in educating the domestic public to cross-national solidarity and from there show their potential influence on the rules of cooperation in the international sphere. I argue that, if the distribution of cosmopolitan obligations is conceived as a political and not just moral issue, we need not consider the absence of comprehensive feelings of solidarity an obstacle to the promotion of global justice (Ypi, 2008). Even if ordinary

individuals are not sufficiently motivated to take responsibility for the welfare of non-citizens, it is enough to count on those individuals, civil movements and political forces that are already sensitive to issues of poverty and trans-national oppression. A cosmopolitan avant-garde would transform society in ways similar to past artistic and political innovators in critical historical stages - taking the lead in developing emancipatory social projects and motivating fellow-citizens to extend solidarity beyond territorial boundaries. This normative exploration of the relation between political agency and moral imperatives attempts to show that widespread feelings of solidarity do not necessarily precede the construction of social justice initiatives. Solidarity constitutes the result of emancipatory political action rather than its indispensable condition of possibility.

2. The concept and its development: artistic and political avant-gardes

The notion of an “avant-garde” movement is of course not new. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Art (1998), the term originally appeared in the 15th century to denote “the foremost part of an army advancing into battle (also called the vanguard)”. Later on it has been used both in art and in politics to emphasize the leading role of particular individuals and social forces in transforming existing cultural and political practices in light of new projects for the emancipation of society. As I illustrate below, these cultural and political initiatives have historically played a crucial role in stretching the boundaries of solidarity to previously excluded groups in society. Exploring their role from a normative perspective, especially by focusing on the way in which they channelled moral discourse through concrete political agency, might help us reflect *by analogy* on how cosmopolitan solidarity could be constructed in contemporary societies.

Apparently the first use of the term avant-garde in its politically emancipatory connotation is owed to Claude Henri de Saint Simon’s *Literary, Philosophical and Industrial Opinions*. Here Saint Simon emphasizes the power of art in using imagination to appeal to people’s feelings in order to facilitate society’s transition toward a more progressive and civilized age (Saint Simon, 1825, 281). His idea of artist-leaders placed the latter at the centre of a trial administrative elite composed of scientists and industrialists/artisans and assigned them a crucial role in communicating to the masses through didactic means whatever science achieved through solid demonstrations.

In continuity with this project, early artistic avant-gardes were characterized by their political commitment to social justice and by the attempt to use aesthetic means to influence a particular mass culture (Egbert, 1967; Hobsbawm, 1999). Inspired by the ideas of Saint Simon, Proudhon, Fourier or Marx, and influenced by the events leading to the Paris Commune, avant-garde painters (from Courbet to Picasso), writers (from Zola to Brecht), and musicians (from Wagner to Schoenberg) perceived their role in society as a break with conventional aesthetic canons and tried to use existing artistic techniques to raise public awareness on burning social issues. The aim was appealing to familiar expressive means but in a way that conveyed a radically different message on the role of art and its relation to mass culture. Whether it was in music, literature, architecture or visual arts, the link that avant-garde movements established between existing cultural practices, innovations in aesthetic canons and political initiative acted both as a critique of present cultural and social institutions and as a concrete instance of their social emancipation.

Political avant-gardes have often perceived themselves in analogy with artistic ones. In the words of Antonio Gramsci, “the active politician is a creator, an initiator; but he neither creates from nothing nor does he move in the turbid void of his own desires and dreams. He bases himself on effective reality, but what is this effective reality? Is it something static and immobile, or is it not rather a relation of forces in continuous motion and shift of equilibrium?” (Gramsci, 1971, 163).

It is worth noticing here how the emphasis on the activity of avant-garde movements shows that particular moral imperatives do not belong to an abstract realm of the hypothetically possible but may be promoted (and in fact are) in real world circumstances. In a way similar to artistic avant-gardes, political ones must use imagination and invest creative energies in giving concrete shape to an abstract vision of the good polity. Both kind of movements aim at transforming society by introducing new discourses which solicit a particular public sphere to become aware of its own limits and opportunities. Both represent creative activities trying to link the past – what has already been achieved – with a vision of the future – what remains to be done - and to motivate the public to undertake specific transformations.

As modern substitutes for the role played in history by individual leaders, avant-garde political agents are assigned the duty to awaken and develop a national collective will by introducing and adapting ideals of justice to particular cultural and political circumstances. The role of “avant-garde” agents is not exhausted in the application of a

political program that promises to fulfil the needs of particular groups in a given historical situation. Their work begins with the process of discovering the ideational centre of production of specific discourses on political agency, subjecting it to critical scrutiny and providing alternative visions on how interactions in the polity should be conceived. Moved by the plight of vulnerable subjects, avant-garde political actors try to expand the boundaries of solidarity within a given political community. They draw attention to the injustice created by the exclusion of particular social groups and carry out initiatives to transform political institutions in a way that promotes democratic enfranchisement.

The historical relevance of avant-garde political movements consists in their ability to occupy the empty space between the critique of existing institutional practices and abstract ideals of social justice with a concrete project for the emancipation of society and the political construction of solidarity. In a way similar to artistic avant-gardes, political ones have acted as the critical conscience of a particular political tradition and made use of the cultural resources that it provided in order to bring into the public arena issues previously excluded from the agenda of institutional actors. Their political initiatives and discursive emphasis on the contrast between the formal recognition of universal principles of freedom and justice and the practical oppression of particular groups could be considered among the main artifices of the expansion of the democratic public sphere and of the enlargement of the bonds of solidarity. Due to the activity of political avant-gardes what initially appeared unacceptable to consolidated elites or was considered over-demanding by the larger mass of citizens progressively matured into a persistent popular request for modifying the scope and franchise of democratic citizenship. It is through the construction of similar political initiatives that other fellow-citizens came to progressively sympathize with the suffering of vulnerable subjects and that initially weak moral motives obtained political agency.

Consider, for example, the way in which the formal recognition of the idea of human dignity in the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man could go hand in hand with the exclusion of women or workers from participating in political decision-making. Or how one of the most fundamental assumptions of natural rights theory, the idea that “every human being is born free”, coexisted for almost three centuries with the institution and practice of slavery. Few people today would question the right of women to vote or defend the legitimacy of holding slaves; few would have doubts condemning apartheid or racial discrimination. There tends to be general agreement on the validity of

certain moral standards and widespread sympathy with the victims of such past abuses. Yet not so long ago several of these issues were subject to heated debate even on the side of an educated public and few seemed motivated to act in their favour. The merit of political avant-gardes consisted in their taking the lead to initiate a process of political protest which made possible the application of such principles to domestic institutions and paved the way to the expansion of solidarity's boundaries.

Think, for another example, about how women's movements initiated with claims for institutional transformation within a small number of countries before they attempted to change international electoral norms. Despite the existence of several suffrage organizations in the nineteenth century, a real international campaign was initiated only in 1904, when the International Women's Suffrage Association was founded. Before that the struggle had been limited to a handful of groups trying to motivate the rest of the citizen body, and national governments made concessions only on the face of strong pressure. Neither did such pressure emerge by itself. Avant-garde movements led by female activists constantly engaged in domestic campaigns of "moral proselytism" and tried to persuade other women about the importance of participating in public life and shift opinion in favour of their own cause (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998). Only after such political avant-gardes succeeded having key states modify their electoral laws, did a "cascade" effect occur, allowing for subsequent reform in a greater number of states. In the case of women's suffrage, once a number of key governments accepted such political transformations, it was easier for domestic actors in other places to exercise pressure and introduce similar changes (Ramirez *et al*, 1997).

A similar dynamic has been observed with regard to some of the greatest movements for social reform during both the 19th century (anti-slavery movement, workers' movement) and the 20th century (anti-apartheid, anti-colonization movement or civil rights movements) (see Crawford, 2002; Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998; Stears, forthcoming). Domestic avant-gardes continue to play a crucial role in promoting human rights campaigns in developing countries (Risse *et al*, 1999). In all those cases the leading role for both persuading fellow-citizens on the exclusionary nature of specific political practices and creating political occasions for protesting and modifying them was played by domestic "avant-garde" movements: groups of committed intellectuals, social activists and enlightened political reformers without whom the democratic transformations we are all familiar with would have never

occurred. The means through which these groups tried to exercise influence in the public may have differed as much as in the case of artistic avant-gardes, but the goal pursued by them followed a similar strategy. The construction of an inclusionary and democratic public sphere through the promotion of emancipatory political initiatives created the possibility of expanding the boundaries of solidarity.

3. The meaning of a “cosmopolitan avant-garde”

The struggle for inclusion in the polity of cosmopolitan imperatives is continuous with such historical efforts. Cosmopolitan discourses on global distributive equality can in fact be interpreted as one more political cause of expansion of the aims and scope of the polity, rendering it more sensitive to the concerns of vulnerable subjects outside our borders and more responsive to ideals of global solidarity rather than domestic self-interest. Applied to the cosmopolitan discourse, the concept of an “avant-garde movement” can be used to denote those political agents for whom the role of the state should not be limited to the protection of those who happen to share particular political boundaries, but ought to include in its franchise the interests of all those affected by its own policies or by the global policies that it contributes enforcing.

But who might constitute the “cosmopolitan avant-garde”? A growing number of authors in recent years have documented the emergence of various political groups and social movements aiming to raise public awareness and build trans-national networks of protest against neo-liberal globalization and in favour of more just and accountable international political institutions (Della Porta *et al*, 1999; Dryzek, 2002). Typically such networks include formal organizations (for example socialist, social-democratic and green political parties as well as trade unions), informal associations (religious or indigenous movements, land-workers and peasants’ organizations) as well as various branches of international non-governmental associations (such as Oxfam or Amnesty International, Emergency) (Keck and Sikkink 1998).

The role of these agents in transforming the polity in a way that promotes inclusion across borders and reflects principles of global solidarity seems to be crucial in at least two dimensions. First of all, emphasizing their very existence already responds to the critique that cosmopolitan imperatives are unable to motivate the citizens of a particular society on issues that elude their immediate sphere of concern (Lenard, this issue). It allows us to show, for one, that the citizens of Western democracies may, and in

fact do, participate in mass mobilizations against, for example, neo-liberal and exploitative policies promoted by international financial institutions in remote regions of the world. Existing attachments, on this account, are hardly static: they can be expanded through involvement in political initiatives of the appropriate kind. Just like advocates of the welfare state have grounded principles of social justice on the duty to protect the vulnerable without requiring any stronger form of identification with the victims of exclusion (see Straehle, this issue, also Goodin 1985) cosmopolitan solidarity is politically constructed on the basis of analogous premises.

Secondly, by focusing on the role of the cosmopolitan avant-garde in taking the lead to challenge the establishment of unfair international rules it is possible to respond to a second critique that cosmopolitanism usually attracts. This critique underlines its inadequate reliance on limited individual actions to bring about large-scale global political transformations. The emphasis on the cosmopolitan avant-garde shifts attention away from the charitable initiatives and personal motivation of individual citizens and focuses on the activity of collective political agents acting as intermediaries between ordinary citizens on the one hand and domestic and international structures on the other. As with historical avant-gardes mobilizing for inclusion in the democratic sphere, their purpose is twofold: on the one hand to make the citizens progressively more sensitive to public campaigns raising awareness on pressing global issues, and on the other to render institutions that require a shift in the existent way of conceptualizing the relations between citizens and strangers more responsive to political claims.

Consider, for example, the recent call from activists in Europe and the United States to boycott the products of multinational companies which make profits by employing cheap labour force - in some cases child labour - in particular areas of the Third World. Several campaigns of mobilization including the organization of public debates and sit-ins, information and activist demonstrations at the outlets of Nike, Levis, Gap etc., have tried to raise public awareness on the labour policies of such multinational corporations abroad. In many American universities, student associations have organized rallies and educative events, occupied campus buildings, and threatened hunger strikes, in trying to put pressure on their universities to end contracts with sportswear companies responsible for paying manufactured workers abroad salaries which did not cover even minimal subsistence needs (Young 2004). These activities urged fellow-citizens to think about the ethical consequences of their preferences as consumers and to take their share

of political responsibility in opposing exploitative practices promoted by multinational corporations.

Consider another example, namely, the pro-migrant campaigns of international networks active in countries with restrictive immigration and asylum policies such as the members of the European Union, the United States or Australia. Building alliances between unionized workers, immigrants, refugees and simple militants these associations have organized international border blockades, planned actions of civil disobedience in check-points and coordinated information seminars on non-violent resistance to protest against the deportation of migrants, denounce the miserable conditions of detention camps and promote the extension of citizenship rights. The goal of such activist campaigns was not simply to target the institutions responsible for the unjust treatment of migrants at the border but also raise public awareness among fellow-citizens about the limits of global institutional processes, which only apply to the free movement of capital and goods but raise barriers among people. Connecting local struggles to trans-national networks of advocacy on global issues has proved to be one of the most successful strategies for politically constructing solidarity.

Clarifying how local political agents should interact with each other and within trans-national networks, what degree of inclusion in the state cosmopolitan movements should seek in order to make their claims more appealing and to what extent institutional groups should try to influence civil society or involve its groups in electoral processes is a complex issue. An adequate answer to this puzzle would require a more case-by-case analysis taking into account the specificities of each political community, its tradition of social mobilization, its institutional past and prospects of reform and the ways its public culture has historically developed. The emergence of a “cosmopolitan avant-garde” seeking to introduce global issues in the agenda of states and include global justice imperatives in the moral commitments of ordinary citizens is, after all, a recent phenomenon. Yet, at this point in the process it seems that the real interest of cosmopolitan avant-garde initiatives all over the world lies not so much in what the movement achieves but in what kind of alternative discourses on social solidarity it manages to create; not in what problems it resolves but in what issues it problematises. Without a widespread public awareness on the relevance of a more inclusive democratic sphere, without a massive assumption of political responsibility on the side of the citizens’ of both affluent and poor states, institutional processes required to fight unjust globalization processes would lack the popular support and relationships of solidarity

needed to be effectively sustained. It is the long-term issue of mass-political motivation rather than that of making concrete proposals in favour of cosmopolitan political structures (a question which relies on political practice as much as on normative argument) that our analysis of the role of the cosmopolitan avant-garde has mainly tried to address.

Someone may object to this normative defense of the role of avant-gardes that a similar model of political agency may not always serve progressive ideals or that avant-garde movements risk taking politics in an elitist, manipulative or even authoritarian direction. This is an important objection but it overlooks the fact that this paper is concerned with only one type of avant-garde movement: the cosmopolitan one and with a very specific source of critique to the cosmopolitan ideal: the motivational critique. The skeptics that this paper addresses do not dispute that cosmopolitanism represents a worthy moral ideal (see for one example, Lenard, this issue) and they do not argue that cosmopolitanism is incompatible with democratic politics. They simply remind us that, notwithstanding its normative plausibility and political desirability, cosmopolitanism may not have enough resources to motivate global solidarity. It is precisely this argument that the paper's defense on the role of cosmopolitan political agency attempts to challenge. Cosmopolitan avant-gardes need not be elitist; on the contrary they promote inclusion. They also need not be manipulative; they stand for greater accountability. And far from raising an obstacle to democracy, they defend the necessity of expanding its reach.

Another potential doubt concerns the relationship between moral discourse and political agency that I have constructed above. In the defense of cosmopolitan avant-gardes presented in this paper, ideals take precedence and political agency is required to realize them in practice. Of course the claim that changes in discourse pave the way to political action and that political action leads in turn to progressively strengthening social bonds is historically and politically contingent. Often social movements have advanced more due to political initiatives built on existing conflicts of interests rather than relying on universal ideals of social justice (Stears, forthcoming). The success of avant-garde causes depends crucially on the ability to speak to particular interests and existing social attachments and combine short-term mobilization with forward looking ideals (Stears 2005). In these cases action precedes moral discourse or, to put it more elegantly, political agency gives greater specificity and enriches the social meaning of moral discourse.

However, in the case of cosmopolitanism the opposite seems to have occurred. As critics point out: “we have been persuaded to believe in cosmopolitanism but we are not doing cosmopolitanism” (Lenard, this issue, Dobson 2006). But the trouble with finding motivational resources to live up to our normative goals need not be deeply rooted in human psychology, it may be a political difficulty. The defence of cosmopolitan avant-gardes articulated in this paper takes issue precisely with that difficulty.

4. Conclusion

This paper started with one of the most frequent critiques cosmopolitanism encounters, a critique emphasizing its motivational weakness in the absence of a global ethos of solidarity. I explored the concept of “avant-garde” political agency to illustrate how solidarity may in fact be artificially constructed even within the nation-state, and I tried to further articulate the role of a “cosmopolitan” avant-garde in motivating fellow-citizens to cross-border solidarity. By promoting alternative discourses of political agency and by attempting to introduce political transformations in particular public spheres, cosmopolitan avant-gardes occupy an empty space between the desirability of certain principles of global justice and their motivational sustainability. They can address political concerns in a way that makes sense to every participant of a shared political culture and they may use existing political structures in a way that seeks to expand the mechanisms of democratic accountability beyond those nationally available. Of course their modes of action and their degree of involvement might vary across places and according to the specific features of the polity in which such attempts are taking place. However, the global presence of political agents committed to cosmopolitan principles of justice and scrutinizing the moral standing of their own states in accordance with such principles, serves as a helpful reminder that constructing global solidarity is more than a theorist’s dream, it is a reality in motion.

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