

McKeil, Aaron C. 2025. *Cosmopolitan Imaginaries and International Disorder*. University of Michigan Press, 200 pp. \$29.95 (Paperback)

“The world would have the appearance of a large republic; men would live everywhere like brothers, and each individual be a citizen of the universe. That this idea should be but a delightful dream! yet it flows from the nature and essence of man. But disorderly passions and private and mistaken interest, will for ever prevent its being realized.” To ensure there is no confusion about the origins and direction of his research design, LSE’s Aaron McKeil appropriately begins his study on cosmopolitanism with this quote from Emmerich de Vattel’s famous mid-eighteenth-century tractate, *The Law of Nations*.

In different times and varying geographies, from Zeno’s *Cosmopolis* and Confucius’ *Grand Unity*, to Vattel’s *World Republic*, to neoliberal commercial globalism, cosmopolitan imaginaries (defined by the author as the “taken-for-granted assumptions people hold about what cosmopolitan belonging can possibly mean, and what it can possibly mean for all humankind to form a political community”, p. 8) have pervaded social thinking and practices, only to meet a set of insurmountable challenges that set them back. This is what McKeil aims to unravel, and he does so competently and successfully. The book’s three sections cover the theoretical and historical foundations of cosmopolitanism, its various modern iterations, as well as a treatise on cosmopolitan politics in the disorderly world of today.

The central argument of the study is that “cosmopolitan order projects in the modern global world have encountered and been overwhelmed by hierarchy legitimization conflicts and recognition struggles reasserting modern state power and remobilizing exclusionary nationalist identities, especially when intensified in contexts of international instability and economic turmoil” (p. 1). Showcasing how this keeps coming about in the central section of the book which covers the cases of Kantian cosmopolitanism (pp. 45–60), world communism (pp. 61–72), postcolonial cosmopolitanism (pp. 73–82), and contemporary green cosmopolitics (pp. 85–94) is a persuasive way of demonstrating how cosmopolitan orders have been imagined and (largely unsuccessfully) translated into political practices. In McKeil’s interpretation, presented within a short vignette on two encounters of H. G. Wells with Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin in 1920 and 1934, is that “cosmopolitan dreams” had “little to do with the political conflicts and struggles of present realities” and that “released into the modern world, these dreams of cosmopolitan orders were overwhelmed by the very divisions and disorder they sought to overcome” (p. 109).

The notion of cosmopolitan order is intuitively conceivable; still, McKeil puts forward a definition of it as an ideal-type concept: its main feature being that it is “transcending international society by (a) forming some sense of imagined cosmopolitan belonging embracing all humankind, with (b) an ability to mobilize resources for common interests to some degree, via (c) either *institutionally* unifying international society with legitimated cosmopolitan authorities or via legitimated *internationalist* cosmopolitan solidarity and nonstate actor coordination” (pp. 7, 21–22). In essence, cosmopolitan order is a real-life operationalization of the aforementioned taken-for-granted assumptions on cosmopolitan belonging – or at least an endeavor towards one.

McKeil has identified two aims of the book, a conceptual-philosophical, and a sociological-historical one – both of them going against conventional wisdom. The first one is formulated as an aspiration to “clarify how cosmopolitan belonging and cosmopolitan ordering are not exclusively a liberal Kantian category, offering a wider conceptual map of cosmopolitan thought and practice in the modern international experience”, while the second one is “to explore how and why these varied cosmopolitan imaginaries struggled to be realized as cosmopolitan orders” (pp. 2–3).

The book would be useful as an account of the ways cosmopolitan politics have emerged throughout history, but what makes it stand out is the way the empirical record is intertwined with theoretical considerations underlying such episodes. According to the author, the study produces twofold implications for theory: “this argument clarifies the explanation and understanding of the limits of cosmopolitan ordering in the modern global world”, at the same time challenging the conventional realist explanations of “persistent global disunity”, by making the case that “cosmopolitan and national belonging have been co-constitutive in the modern international experience” (p. 2). This latter view assumes that “nations are not latent or preexisting obstacles to internationalist cosmopolitanism [...] but are instead reconstituted as exclusionary in processes of recognition struggle and the reassertion of the nation-state authority” (p. 2).

Obviously, as with any quality research, in McKeil’s study there is something for everyone to be mad about. Still, there is an occasional – and for a less cautious reader, perhaps surprising – nod to realism. McKeil does this by referring to Hans J. Morgenthau’s commendation for David Mitrany’s world peace system plans (p. 4), discussing William E. Scheuerman’s advocacy for global reform, but especially by vindicating Martin Wight’s positions in the book’s epilogue.

In that short but compelling section of the text, McKeil turns his attention to Martin Wight’s thinking on intellectual “revolutionism” underlying most if not all modern-world strains of cosmopolitan theory and practice. This comes as an implication of cosmopolitan imaginaries’ perpetual failure to come to life, as well as a subtle vindication of realist sentiment if not its specific theoretical and political interpretations. When discussing

the so called inverted revolutionism, an intellectual stance transcending the binary division between “hard” and “soft” revolutionism in thinking about cosmopolitanism, Wight assesses that, in its classic form, “it is fed by a pessimistic estimate of human nature, not an optimistic one”, and that “this bleak view of mankind may explain why pacifists, if they descend from being above the battle to entering the fray, tend to adopt a Realist stance” (p. 115).

The thinkers endorsed by McKeil in the epilogue advocate for measure and moderation. Today’s disorderly world lacks the much-needed sobriety and prudence that could counter the traditional zeal – or, as McKeil describes it, invoking Wight and Isaiah Berlin, the fanaticism – of revolutionism. In other words, when it comes to cosmopolitan imaginaries of the future, less could be more.

Despite having just 115 pages of main text, *Cosmopolitan Imaginaries and International Disorder* gives the impression of being a significantly longer study. This is due to the breadth and scope of the research topic, the complexity of McKeil’s arguments, and mostly the abundance of sources and references he has extensively critiqued or drawn from. It may seem that covering such a rich corpus of relevant sources – and from such diverse eras – should be impossible in a book of this length, but it turns out that clear research goals and skillful writing are essential in overcoming such obstacles.

What is interesting and may seem counterintuitive in the current state of international politics, where Russia is often viewed as such a staunch advocate of dated forms of sovereignism and nationalism that it is hard to connect it to cosmopolitan tradition in any way, is that Russian political thinkers and practitioners like Lenin and Stalin, but also Dostoevsky and Herzen, figure quite prominently throughout the text. Indeed, one of the successes of McKeil’s study is demonstrating how cosmopolitan imaginaries transcend the temporal and spatial limits traditionally ascribed to them.

The book is a gripping intellectual quest on its own, but could be even more engaging if read in pairing with books such as Giulio Gallarotti’s *Cosmopolitan Power in International Relations*, Philip Cunliffe’s *Cosmopolitan Dystopia*, Kyle M. Lascurettes’ *Orders of Exclusion*, Rohan Mukherjee’s *Ascending Order*, *The Internationalists* by Oona A. Hathaway and Scott J. Shapiro, or even *The False Promise of Liberal Order* by Patrick Porter or *Exit from Hegemony* by Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon. This is a welcome feature of any academic piece: to be clearly situated within a body of literature while maintaining its own distinctiveness.

In times ahead, McKeil’s book will undoubtedly serve as an invaluable guide to modern intellectual history, while also highlighting the reasons why theory often fails to translate into effective policies. In his own words, again uttering the call for sobriety and cold-mindedness, “it will remain possible to imagine and practice cosmopolitan politics and

belonging in a deglobalizing and disorderly world, albeit in constrained ways and without the possibility of a cosmopolitan order” (p. 97).

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