

Cosmopolis/Cosmopolitics: Humanities and Citizenship After Neo-Liberalism?*

Samir Gandesha and Stuart Poyntz

The Institute for the Humanities is now in the process of changing direction. In addition to a refashioned website—one which we hope will be more dynamic, responsive, and interactive—we are re-launching our journal *Contours: Journal of the Institute for the Humanities* (previously entitled *Humanitas*). We felt that the title, direction, and look and feel of the journal should be brought more fully in line with its new online home. In this inaugural issue of *Contours* we mark a transition insofar as we publish the proceedings of our very successful conference Cosmopolis/Cosmopolitics. This conference capped a four-year long project seeking to revitalize the idea and practices of citizenship. In this we sought to pose the question as to what a cosmopolitan form of citizenship might look like. Such a form would be capacious enough to include the many working groups that investigated and probed different aspects of citizenship. The journal will become incarnate over time as we decide on the most appropriate format and will most likely involve some admixture of our traditional foci in areas such as Alternatives to Violence, Human Rights and Democratic Development, as well as modern Perspectives in the Humanities, and innovations such as, for example, a new and exciting poetry section under the editorial direction of Professor Clint Burnham of the Department of English, who is an acclaimed poet and, as was demonstrated by his wonderful Digital Natives public art installation in Vancouver, an artist in his own right. With Clint's assistance we hope to showcase the tremendous talent of Canadian writers and artists, particularly though not exclusively, from Vancouver. We intend to publish

* Republished from *Contours*, Issue 1: Spring/Summer 2011. Edited and reformatted for publication.

selected papers delivered at the Institute, as well as invite high quality submissions that demonstrate the continuing and enduring contemporaneity of humanistic perspectives.

The collection of essays [in *Contours*, Issue 1]—all of which broadly confront the vexed, if still crucial task of conceptualizing the meaning and obligations of a robust form of citizenship—come about at a time when the process set in motion more than 30 years ago, a logic commonly referred to as “globalization,” has become deeply troubled. The crisis of the entire, interconnected global financial system, persistent and structural unemployment, the ominous spectre of dramatic deflation within the global economy, and new and precarious forms of employment (where jobs are available at all), have shown that the neo-liberal project of “emancipating” the market at the expense of states and citizens is not just economically fraught, but morally and politically bankrupt. Yet, at this conjuncture, characterized by the redoubled movement of peoples, due not only to social, economic, and political causes, but also to climate change and its myriad destabilizing effects, the need to think through the conditions of possibility for global solidarity, transformative politics, and social justice is as urgent as ever. From a humanistic perspective, this is to say the time has never been better for bringing back the citizen, that subject par excellence of what Hannah Arendt called the *vita activa*.

As Arendt understood, citizenship is not that narrow and often violent and exclusionary horizon of the nation state. It is rather a form of subjectivity marked by an openness to new beginnings, to new urgencies, to new encounters with others, because “it is the beginner,” Lisa Robertson reminds us in her contribution to this issue, “born into speech, speaking to the world, to other beginners, who is the guarantor of political freedom.” Citizenship understood in these terms is a subjectivity fashioned in the unpredictability and agonism of public life, a place where the “web of human relations” (Arendt) suddenly becomes visible in and through our encounters with

others. Such a place echoes with acts of serendipity, the sort of actions “you can’t control, you can’t monitor, you can’t choreograph” (Hern, 2009). Rather, they are the material practices, the conduits that reveal “the improbable and always renewing freedom inherent in collective life” (Robertson, 2011).

The city, with its long association with citizenship, is a vital site for thinking through precisely these new, transformed conditions for a cosmopolitan citizenship. Contrasting with Chaos, Cosmos signified order in its original Greek inflection, but has now come to also mean the larger universe as a whole and therefore “nature.” The Polis, of course, is city or state; this was the community outside of which, as Aristotle famously argued, only animals or gods could live. Accordingly, a cosmo-polis is a city that sits at the intersection of nature and history; it is a singularity that paradoxically embodies the universal. It is the space, consequently, where a cosmopolitics might be undertaken; a politics that explodes the static oppositions between universal and particular, between a fixed ethnocentrism and multiculturalism, between globalism and localism.

Exploring the possibilities for such a politics was the task set for those who took part in the Institute for the Humanities’ Cosmopolis/Cosmopolitics Conference held in May 2010 at Simon Fraser University’s Vancouver campus. Subtitled “Humanities and Citizenship After Neo-Liberalism?” our aim was not to suggest the historical realization of neo-liberalism’s demise, but through dialogue and debate, to note the profound crises and inequities characteristic of our neo-liberal present, and to elicit thinking about a revitalized citizenship that might offer a vision for a future politics. This work in turn was the outgrowth of a four year project undertaken by the Humanities Institute which aimed to explore the intersection of cosmos and polis by re-imagining citizenship from a number of different perspectives, including: the relationship between

modernization and urbanization and the formation of new, often contradictory, political agencies and identities; the struggle for social justice and social inclusion; questions concerning the ever more tightly articulated relationship between nature and history, built and natural environments; art and the aesthetic as the basis for dialogue, critique and transformation; the media as the basis for hegemonic as well as counter-hegemonic politics, the virtual and real space for a counter-public. Underlying this initiative and the conference itself is our contention that the humanities is ideally set to nurture and foster these dialogues because as a discipline it has long been preoccupied with those conditions, possibilities, and texts that enable self-development in the service of an active and engaged citizenry. Indeed, more than that, the humanities has felt itself under a unique kind of pressure within the walls of the university and beyond: namely, to justify its purpose and continued existence within an essentially econometric discourse, the basic grammar of which is quantitative. Such a language is premised upon a conception of human behavior as the unreflective response to external stimuli and relies for its scientific credentials on forms of sociobiology. In contrast, the humanities broadly understood relies on a notion of reflective action underwritten by a conception of freedom as the capacity formed within a diversity of traditions to initiate something “new.”

The humanities is, therefore, fertile ground for a new cosmopolitics, the location in which inter- and intra-civilizational dialogues might occur. The fundamentally hermeneutic nature of the humanities, its concern with the explication and interpretation of meaning in its various manifestations, cannot be understood in measurable outcomes; nonetheless, it is precisely because of its concern with the interpretation of meaning that the humanities is indispensable for addressing the crucial questions—political, social, ethical, and aesthetic—of our time. For example, one of the key civilizational questions of global society is the extent to which religious traditions,

particularly Islam, can be reconciled with the liberal commitment to the separation of Church and State; to what extent can such traditions be reconciled with the advances in Western science and technology; the changing role and status of women in society; new sexual identities and practices? Important as these faculties and disciplines are, economics, engineering and computer science are simply not going to be able to provide answers to what are in essence interpretive and normative questions. As Tariq Ramadan, the controversial Islamic scholar and public intellectual, recently argued in a talk hosted at SFU by the Centre for the Comparative Muslim Societies, what is required is a new “Islamic hermeneutics” by which he means a new, “modern” interpretation of the Koran and Hadith.

The “book ends” of [the Cosmopolis/Cosmopolitics] conference are, on the one hand, the Green Revolution, which reached its crescendo in the Spring of 2009, and the “Arab Spring” that is still unfolding and whose wide-ranging implications remain to be seen. As David Diewert suggests in his paper, “Intensities of Prophetic Citizenship,” religion is a double-edged sword. While its discourses have legitimated political power and violence over millennia, it can also “nurture a citizenship that resists captivity to ideologies of triumphant (i.e. violent) nationalism or neo-liberal visions of comfortable self-preservation achieved through individual consumption.” At the same time, however, what has been so surprising and for many of us so hopeful in the uprisings throughout the Arab world and the continuing resistance in Iran is the secular nature of the demands made by the various movements in these societies. Perhaps the one slogan that brings this home and shows, once again, the enduring importance of humanistic traditions are words that can be seen running through history like a silver thread: Human dignity.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank Diana Chan for doing such a wonderful job designing and constructing our new website, Suzanne Hawkins for impeccable copy-editing, and Sandra Zink for supporting their efforts.