

The Powers of Diaspora and Democratic Cosmopolitanism

Introduction

In this paper, I attempt to articulate an ethics of minority by presenting two theories and discussing their implications both theoretical and practical. First, I consider Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin's theory of diaspora. Next, I present the democratic cosmopolitanism advocated by Bonnie Honig. I then compare the merits and shortcomings of each theory as a means to gesture towards an ethics of minority. I conclude with an attempt to articulate such an ethics by arguing that we should combine the pragmatic adaptability of Honig's democratic cosmopolitanism with the affective promise of the Boyarins' theory of diaspora.

The Boyarins

In *Powers of Diaspora*, Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin sketch out a theory of diaspora.¹ By this they mean the “critical privileging of diaspora ... as a ‘normal’ situation rather than a negative symptom of disorder” (*PD* 5). The Boyarins² foreground the Jewish experience as a crucial part of the “contemporary diasporic rubric” (*PD* 10). They argue that the Jews are the paradigmatic diasporic community because they have been repeatedly removed and regrouped. Yet the Jews are also at the periphery: they are an unmoored diaspora, a community without a homeland for all except the

¹ Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora: Two Essays on the Relevance of Jewish Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008). Henceforth simply *PD*.

² The Introduction from which these quotations are drawn was written only “by Jonathan,” but the authors prefer their voices “to merge into a rhetorical ‘we’” (*PD* viii-ix). Following their wishes, in this paper I always refer to the authors in the plural.

last fifty years. Both characteristics of the Jews make their consideration an ideal entry point to the Boyarins' theoretical perspective.

First, a disquisition on the Jewish diaspora is a chance to subvert the hegemonic logic of nationalism. The Boyarins rightly recognize that this logic – which sees “the ethnic, territorial nation as the proper *unit* of polity and collective identity” (*PD* 10) – characterizes more than just nationalism itself. Even “alternatives” like pluralism and internationalism are actually just the complements of nationalism. Although such movements try to ameliorate the excesses of nationalism, they do so with the same tools as the harmful ideology itself. For example, internationalism is emphatically *not* globalism. Instead it is *internationalism*. As an ideology, it expresses a view of the world in harmony. Yet this normative project still centers on the *national* as the unit that can be brought into harmony. Centering “diaspora” is a chance to disrupt this problematic ideal. Through this conceptual shift, the unit is no longer the nation but rather the diasporic community. In turn, this allows us to articulate a much more potent form of pluralism or globalism. For example, we can advocate plural *diasporas* rather than plural *nations*. This reorientation towards the diaspora powerfully problematizes the transposition of metropolitan ideals (here, the nation-state) everywhere else. After all, the nation-state is itself a *project* with a history and a context of creation; it was created in Enlightenment Europe alongside the concomitant concepts of ‘universal’ reason and the ideal citizen-subject. The ‘Jewish Question’ arose precisely because the Jews posed a threat to the nation-state since they were a people attached to their historical, particular identity. Before we transpose the idea of the nation-state elsewhere, we must recognize its history, including both its conception (in the Enlightenment) and its limits (as illustrated by the Jewish Question). Diaspora theory problematizes the transposition of the nation-state to the periphery and offers a (more powerful) theoretical alternative.

Second, the Boyarins convincingly argue that diaspora problematizes the “‘normal’ coincidence of citizenship and identity” (*PD* 16). The value of this disruption is illustrated by the Boyarins’ analysis of Skinner. According to them, he argues that diaspora is unstable and should collapse into either repatriation or assimilation. Specifically, in the case of the Jews Skinner makes the “odd prediction that ‘American and other Jews may have to choose either Israeli citizenship or the citizenship of the state in which they were born or live’” (*PD* 15). In other words, the creation of a Jewish nation-state means that the Jews as a diasporic community must collapse. The tension Skinner identifies arises from his equation of identity with citizenship. Rather than acknowledging the self-perpetuation of the diaspora, sometimes even by choice, Skinner assumes that the diaspora desires to maintain its identity by finding an identical citizenship. He is therefore perplexed that some communities reject the “opportunity to ‘return’ en masse” (*PD* 15). The Boyarins see the fundamental issue here as being that Skinner “does not acknowledge the powers of diaspora” (*PD* 16). Diaspora, in the Boyarins’ view, is a powerful enough identity to withstand collapse and thus disrupt the symbolic link between identity and citizenship. Putting the powers of diaspora at the center of a theoretical framework represents a chance to subvert the hegemony of coincidental identity and citizenship and offer promising alternatives.

So, what does this theoretical alternative – centering diaspora – look like? Perhaps the best way to get a sense of this is to consider what it is *not*. Most importantly, the Boyarins recognize that they “do not want the term to cover everything” (*PD* 23). In addition, diaspora should not be taken as “categorically *new*” (*PD* 27). The Boyarins analyze the example of migration, which they say “presupposes the permanence of the place moved to” (*PD* 27). In other words, the place moved to is more real and more substantial than movement itself or diaspora itself. We can escape this logic by recognizing that diaspora can take ontological priority. What this means is that diaspora can be

explanatorily fundamental in its own right; it can “ground” theory as something that exists independently from it. By recognizing diaspora’s ontological priority, we can begin a different normative project. No longer need we take the crossing of juridical boundaries – either emigrating or immigrating – as the crux of the moral argument. Rather, the ethics we construct can take the diaspora as a starting point. Furthermore, this reorientation is particularly valuable because diaspora has been so influential: “global polity per se is perpetually organized, disorganized, and reorganized according to logics of diaspora” (*PD* 9). For example, many modern Western countries are largely made up of immigrant groups. The very nature of these nations is determined by the interaction between these diasporas. The Boyarins’ proposal is so potent because it recognizes these dynamics in the world and translates them into an appropriate theoretical vocabulary through which a better normative project can be begun.

In the end, this is what diaspora theory amounts to: a refiguring of ontological priority that gives room to truly novel moral projects. No longer need we posit as the two poles ‘statism’ and ‘cosmopolitanism’ – both of which hinge on the nation-state. Rather, we have the freedom to explore moral terrain that considers the diaspora as a stable entity worthy of analysis.

Honig

In her work on democratic cosmopolitanism Bonnie Honig, too, begins with reference to the Jews.³ Specifically, she discusses the story of Ruth as the paradigm of the immigrant figured both as someone “feared for what they will do to us” and “valued for what ‘they’ bring to ‘us’” (*DF* 46). Honig also discusses several readings of the story of Ruth, including the interpretation offered by Julia Kristeva, a feminist philosopher and psychoanalyst. In Kristeva’s approach to Ruth Honig

³ Bonnie Honig, *Democracy and the Foreigner* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). Hereafter only *DF*.

identifies a key difference in approaches to citizenship (in France). On the one hand, Kristeva values the affective relationship to citizenship. She therefore looks for evidence that Ruth was willing to swear allegiance to Naomi and to her god (*DF* 62). Similarly, the French Right calls for the requirement of that kind of affective link between the immigrant and France before ‘awarding’ citizenship. On the other hand, the evidence is clear that the majority of immigrants relate to citizenship “in purely instrumental terms” (*DF* 62). Kristeva’s answer is not to cleave to the Right, but rather to posit an intermediate form of cosmopolitanism, where the nation is a *transitional object*. Relations are “secured by affective relations to a series of ‘sets’” (*DF* 63) which progress from self to family to homeland to region to mankind. Each of these is a “transitional object for the next” (*DF* 63). Thus, Kristeva’s cosmopolitanism is “rooted and affective but attached finally to a transnational, not a national, object” (*DF* 63). Ultimately, however, Kristeva’s theory succumbs to the same pitfall as any form of cosmopolitanism: it can only be “striven for through the particular ... (national) cultures that shape us” (*DF* 63).

In the next chapter, Honig meets this normative challenge by articulating three models of the foreigner: the capitalist, the communitarian, and the liberal. Each of these models contains a xenophilic element and its xenophobic counterpart. For example, the capitalist American Dream does indeed welcome foreigners because of their value to commerce. But this value denies the foreigner any political power. The Asian-American entrepreneur is lauded for his capitalistic success, but any hint of insurrection – say, a plea for better working conditions – is immediately condemned. The liberal model of the foreigner contains similar tensions. It looks to immigrants to “reperform the official social contract by naturalizing to citizenship,” thus “recenter[ing] the regime on its fictive foundation of voluntarist consent” (*DF* 94–5). It welcomes the immigrant because of this function, but this welcome has a dark underside. For what to make of the immigrant

who does *not* naturalize and thus does *not* legitimate the state? This foreigner is an alien “to whom we supposedly do not consent and who does not consent to us” (*DF* 97). In all three models of the foreigner, we again see a supposedly liminal state – here the immigrant, earlier in the Boyarins the diaspora – figured as unstable. In Honig’s case, the immanent critique of the models of the foreigner elucidates his place in the path to the ‘normal’ state in which identity coincides with citizenship.

What to make of this? Honig’s answer is to “denationalize the state” to make room for “alternative sites of affect and identity” (*DF* 105). This can be seen through the example of “aboriginals” in Canada. The Canadian government challenged indigenous people’s use of UN forums on the grounds that “Indians are Canadian citizens” (*DF* 105). Honig’s analysis is worth quoting in full: “the resistance of states like Canada to their citizens’ or residents’ efforts to organize along extranational axes of identity suggests that the denationalization of the state from an affective to an instrumental set of institutions may be a necessary step on the road toward a more vibrant and empowered democratic politics” (*DF* 106). Honig, in short, argues that democratic institutions must be made instrumental – rather than affective – precisely to strengthen those very institutions. The type of politics that Canada strives for (or should strive for), namely a vibrant democracy, is best achieved by granting all their citizens the right to advocate along forms of resistance that transcend the nation-state – including their identity as indigenous peoples. This is an extremely powerful insight: cosmopolitanism is democratic because it allows the emergence and affiliation of voices previously silenced. In other words, the body politic is fortified when it can organize along “extranational axes.”

This is the heart of Honig’s democratic cosmopolitanism. But there is more. Honig also advocates refiguring cosmopolitanism as *affective* by drawing on the transitional objects that Kristeva

discusses. This may seem strange; after all, Honig advocates making democratic institutions *instrumental*. Yet a deep logic lies behind Honig's direction. She recognizes that democratic cosmopolitanism lacks affective relations. This dearth of affect greatly hinders its implementation and its political appeal. Statists – on left and right – have an almost complete monopoly on affect in the form of 'patriotic' sentiments. So even when one recognizes and tries to implement the ideals of democratic cosmopolitanism, one faces the very real threat of a populist (statist) rebellion. Few deny the call of morality, but who is willing to make real sacrifices for the sake of morality without deep emotional ties? If Honig could successfully lay out how democratic cosmopolitanism can be made affective, she will have created a veritable panacea. Yet herein lies the rub: how can one simultaneously transform affective institutions into instrumental ones while ensuring that the new relations with democratic cosmopolitanism are themselves affective?

Comparison

Perhaps the answer to this question lies in the diaspora theory advocated by the Boyarins. In many ways, Honig's plea for democratic cosmopolitanism resembles the call for centering diaspora. In both cases, the status quo – centering on the nation-state – is seen as unacceptable. In both cases, there are concrete examples of powerful objects that transcend the nation state. Indeed, instead of indigenous peoples in Canada, Honig could have used the example of the Jews. When Jews organized the Bund in the early twentieth century, they sought power through an extranational axis – namely, their membership in the Jewish diaspora. Although the organization – in full, the General Jewish Labor Bund in Lithuania, Poland, and Russia – lasted only 23 years, it had a salient impact on the labor movement, Jewish history, and the project of internationalism. This example demonstrates both the “powers of diaspora” and the need for “democratic cosmopolitanism.”

Nevertheless, there are significant differences between the Boyarins' and Honig's theories. The Boyarins advocate a theoretical reorientation towards diaspora. On the other hand, Honig's call is primarily for state institutions to be denationalized: to transfigure relations from the instrumental to the affective. Of the two theories, Honig's is the more pragmatic and practical. Indeed, this impression is reinforced by her call to make the new democratic cosmopolitanism affective. By addressing this issue, Honig foresees a very real possibility of political untenability. The second major difference is that the Boyarins' theory is much more specific: it posits *diaspora* as the crux. Honig, though, recognizes many possible "extranational axes" of organization, just one of which could be diaspora.

Evaluation and synthesis

I now propose to synthesize the pragmatic adaptability of Honig's democratic cosmopolitanism with the affective promise of the Boyarins' diaspora theory. I support Honig's call for the state to be denationalized in favor of organization along extranational axes. I will note here that this has power not only for groups that transcend national boundaries but even for those within a state. For example, many laborers in the United Arab Emirates face terrible working conditions, including "passport confiscation, withheld wages and squalid living conditions."⁴ At the same time, they are denied the opportunity to take collective action (under UAE law, unions are illegal). Much of this is justified with the assertion that these laborers are not UAE nationals. How can one respond? Easily: one identifies labor as an extranational axis along which laborers of all nationalities can be organized. Labor thus transcends differences in national origin to become a potent tool for

⁴ Nick Hunt, "Dubai's Labour Trap," *Political Insight* 2, no. 2 (September 1, 2011): 24, doi:10.1111/j.2041-9066.2011.00069.x.

organization and political action. Democracy is strengthened through a form of cosmopolitanism (even if, in this case, internal to one state).

Yet this type of organization would face enormous resistance. For one, a call to organize along the transnational category of ‘labor’ bears an eerie resemblance to Marxism. No capitalist state – of which the UAE is the quintessence – would stand idly by when it sees even a shadow of the red specter. How shall one overcome this opposition? The answer lies in the powers of diaspora that the Boyarins identified. In the case of the UAE, figuring diaspora as ontologically stable is especially powerful. In the current state, members of the various ‘national’ (immigrant/expatriate) communities are almost always on the path to return to their ‘homeland’ – except for those lucky few (mostly Arabs) who might get the chance to assimilate and gain Emirati citizenship. The Boyarins’ view would recognize that these communities have a right to exist, and to persist, with neither the home state’s backing nor the support of the UAE. Rather, the diasporas are powerful and important *within* the UAE. This recognition, if taken to heart, would establish new, potent affective links between the subjects and the extranational axes of organization.

I would here like to note one pitfall: this call should certainly not be taken for a desire to exchange one master (the nation-state) for another (the diaspora). It just so happens that in the United Arab Emirates, diaspora is one of the most potent extranational axes of organization (along with labor). It is also the most amenable to being a transitional object. Because of its status in the UAE, diaspora provides a viable path to realizing the call for organization along extranational axes. This exemplifies how Honig and the Boyarins’ theories can complement each other. Very real benefits are offered by democratic cosmopolitanism; the powers of diaspora give this project a much greater chance of success. Analogous arguments can be made about other extranational axes of organization and similar recognitions of ontological priority. In sum, diaspora theory is an ideal

template for the establishment of affect necessary for implementing the ideal of democratic cosmopolitanism.

Perhaps the most troubling objection to this type of normative project is Žižek's accusation of hypocrisy. Žižek asserts that "the greatest hypocrites are those who advocate open borders: secretly, they know very well this will never happen, for it would trigger an instant populist revolt."⁵ His invective is directed at those who advocate open borders, but analogous arguments can easily be made for the proponents of democratic cosmopolitanism. His argument is simple yet powerful: the only reason these normative projects are morally viable is because they are politically untenable. This is so distressing because it is at least partly true. Indeed, moral proposals that are so popular among theorists are often simply impractical. Yet I would respond to Žižek by asserting that holding an ideal that cannot be put into practice is not hypocrisy. Rather, it reflects a sincere desire to strive for something greater than ourselves. This does not mean that we should dismiss Žižekian criticism, though. Rather, we must keep claims of hypocrisy in the back of our minds as we consider and develop moral theories. In sum, I believe the correct way to read Žižek is not as a demand for equivocation but rather as a plea for sincere self-reflexivity.⁶ This self-reflexivity should be the first step in a real engagement with *making* the normative project politically tenable.

Conclusion

I have outlined what I believe to be a clear articulation of the Boyarins' diaspora theory and Honig's democratic cosmopolitanism. I then compared the theories and considered each one's successes and weaknesses. In so doing, I have approached an articulation of the ethics of

⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Refugees, Terror and Other Troubles with the Neighbors: Against the Double Blackmail* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2016), 9.

⁶ I greatly appreciate the input of Paul Nahme in articulating this point.

minority: namely, a version of democratic cosmopolitanism that gives ontological priority to extranational axes of organization as a means of creating the affective links necessary to make the normative project politically tenable. Although it is by no means complete, I believe this articulation of the ethics of minority to be both idealistic and pragmatic.