

# Living in a Dissonant World: Toward an Agonistic Cosmopolitics for Education

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Published online: 17 December 2009  
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**Abstract** As a flashpoint for specific instances of conflict, Muslim sartorial practices have at times been seen as being antagonistic to “western” ideas of gender equality, secularity, and communicative practices. In light of this, I seek to highlight the ways in which such moments of antagonism actually might be understood on “cosmopolitical” terms, that is, through a framework informed by a critical and political approach to cosmopolitanism itself. Thus, through an “agonistic cosmopolitics” I here argue for a more robust political understanding of what a cosmopolitan orientation to cultural difference can offer education. The paper moves from a focus on harmony to agonism and from cosmopolitanism to the cosmopolitical, and within each I discuss the questions of democracy and universality, respectively. Drawing on, the work of Chantal Mouffe, Judith Butler and Bonnie Honig, I discuss the basis upon which our agonistic interactions can inform education in promoting better ways of living together. This requires, in my view, nothing less than a clear understanding of the very difficulties of pluralism and a questioning of some of the ways we often reflect on the political dimension of these difficulties. I offer some reflections on what an agonistic cosmopolitics has to offer the debates surrounding the wearing of various forms of Muslim dress in schools in the conclusion. My overall claim is that cosmopolitanism as a set of ideas that seek more peaceful forms of living together on a global scale is in need of a theoretical framework that faces directly the difficulties of living in a dissonant world.

**Keywords** Cosmopolitanism · Agonism · Cosmopolitics · Pluralism · Conflict · Democracy · Universalism · Muslim

Our experience of living in a pluralist world has generated numerous theories that have focused their sights on the question of how to live well, and peacefully, within culturally

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diverse contexts. One of the most lasting on the political stage has been cosmopolitanism; one of “grand dames” of political thought that has appeared with regularity over the course of some 2000 years. As Amanda Anderson notes, “cosmopolitanism has repeatedly emerged at times when the world has suddenly seemed to expand in unassimilable ways” (Anderson 1998, p. 272). Thus, the current interest in cosmopolitanism, at least over the past decade, has been linked to increasing economic and political globalization as well as mass migration, the ease of world travel and everyday contact between diverse cultural communities. The complexities of intercultural interaction, communication, and interdependency bring to light the need for a more “worldly” response to living together than other projects, such as multiculturalism, have been able to offer. Part of its re-emergence today in Europe needs to be seen, in my view, in relation to the real, on-the-ground issues currently being articulated around questions of citizenship, belonging, and intercultural exchange. One such issue that has surfaced and become a growing area of educational concern is the controversy surrounding the wearing of Muslim forms of dress to schools (e.g., *hijab*, *niqab*, *burqa*, *jilbab*).<sup>1</sup>

What has become clear for me, from within the context of a study exploring these debates in Sweden, the UK, and France, is that these practices have become signs of unbearable dissonance for some politicians and school authorities.<sup>2</sup> Muslim girls have been at the centre of discussions over the values of liberal democracy and the responsibilities states have to Muslim minority communities through institutions such as schools. Questions have been raised as to whether these girls are “integrated” sufficiently into the societies in which they live and whether they exhibit a form of belonging appropriate to western European nations. Moreover, they are often referred to as “residents” in Europe in official educational documentation instead of as Muslim Europeans or European Muslims, despite the fact that many of them have been born on European soil. As a flashpoint for specific instances of conflict, Muslim sartorial practices have at times been seen as being antagonistic to “western” ideas of gender equality, secularity, and communicative practices.<sup>3</sup>

In light of this, I seek to highlight the ways in which such moments of antagonism actually might be understood on “cosmopolitical” terms, that is, through a framework informed by a critical and political approach to cosmopolitanism itself. Drawing on the work of Chantal Mouffe, Bonnie Honig and Judith Butler, I argue here for a more robust *political* understanding of what a cosmopolitan orientation to cultural difference—and the conflicts this sometimes generates—can offer education. Specifically, I develop a notion of

<sup>1</sup> There is a range of clothing that is included here: the *burqa* generally refers to a veil that covers the face with holes for the eyes. The *niqab* covers the lower part of the face, up to the eyes. Full *burqa* or *chador* covers the entire body and face with nets for the eyes. *Jilbab* is a long dress and headscarf that allows the hands and face to be exposed. *Hijab* is generally used to describe the wearing of a headscarf, but it can also refer to a modest form of attire as well. See Ruitenbergh (2007) for a discussion of the importance of not subsuming all practices under the banner “veiling”.

<sup>2</sup> This paper is based on research conducted within an on-going research project sponsored by the Swedish National Research Council entitled, “Gendering the Cosmopolitan Ethic: A Feminist Inquiry into Intercultural and Human Rights Issues in Education”.

<sup>3</sup> With respect to the latter, it is the *niqab* and *burqa* that are often cited as being inimical to western communicative practices since they hide the face, although not the eyes. The assumption here is that exposure of the face is perceived to be necessary to good communication, and this reason has been mounted unquestioningly in defence of why girls and women who veil their faces should not be allowed to teach or study in public schools.

an “agonistic cosmopolitics,” one that emphasizes the importance of antagonism for democratic political struggle and that attends to the particularities of these antagonisms in their specific political contexts. The paper as a whole explores an agonistic cosmopolitics as a framework for addressing issues of cultural conflict in education.

By way of introduction to my argument, I turn first to a brief exploration of cosmopolitanism and provide a justification for my critical-political orientation to it. Here I introduce the term cosmopolitics and outline my reasons for moving away from the language of cosmopolitanism—as an ‘ism’. This is followed by a detailed discussion of Chantal Mouffe’s critique of cosmopolitanism around questions of universalism and harmony. I also highlight how Mouffe’s agonistic theory of democracy is helpful for creating a political language through which cultural conflicts, such as the debate over Muslim dress, can be better understood. The next section delves more deeply into the shift from cosmopolitanism to cosmopolitics. Here, I discuss primarily the work of Bonnie Honig and Judith Butler as a way of reframing universality and propose that attention to specific political contexts is a necessary feature of a cosmopolitical approach. I conclude with some thoughts on what an “agonistic cosmopolitics” has to offer education as an approach to cultural conflict and return to a discussion of the issues facing women and girls who wear forms of Muslim dress to school.

### **Cosmopolitanism and Its Critics: An Introduction to the Argument**

As political philosopher Seyla Benhabib observes, cosmopolitanism has become “one of the keywords of our times” (2006, p. 17). Indeed, calls for a cosmopolitan direction in both political philosophy and education, as well as in ethics and cultural studies, have gravitated around a constellation of ideas: peaceful co-existence, global harmony, world citizenship, universal human rights, and forms of hybrid belonging. It is sometimes used in the plural to capture the idea that through our everyday encounters with other cultural communities we live in “actually existing” cosmopolitanisms (Malcomson 1998). What such diversity signifies is that although cosmopolitanism is indeed a keyword for our age, it cannot be distilled into a single, consistent worldview.

With this said, however, there is a relative consistency evident in cosmopolitanism as it appears within the field of education, and is influenced primarily by the Kantian pillars of universal human rights and intercultural understanding. Both theoretical writing on the topic and educational policy (such as that emanating from the Council of Europe) express the idea that moving toward a consolidation of trans-national and global identities requires, on the one hand, a deeper understanding of other cultures and, on the other hand, a sense that basic rights exist independently of our national belonging. Indeed, advocates for world citizenship and global justice in education (e.g., Kemp 2005; Nussbaum 1997; Enslin and Tjiattas 2004) frequently see cosmopolitanism as offering the possibility for greater harmony across human diversity through these two main commitments. Moreover, cosmopolitan perspectives in education are often accompanied by a dialogical model of democracy, that is, a democracy that seeks to arrive at consensus through rationally based forms of communication (see Todd and Säfström 2008). This cosmopolitan move in education, with few exceptions (see Hansen 2008), has been based largely on appeals to universalism to unite us across our global differences: that is, while cosmopolitanism seeks intercultural forms of exchange, emphasis is placed on the universal aspects of that exchange and is reliant upon the ideas of a universal humanity, universal rights, and universally agreed upon standards of communication. Thus, a dominating trend in

cosmopolitan education has been to formulate the universal conditions (political, legal, and/or moral) through which co-existence can be made both more democratic and more harmonious.

Yet, both within certain strands of cosmopolitanism itself and within democratic theory broadly speaking, there exists a deep suspicion of such universal aspirations. This centres on the question as to whether universalism is an appropriate ground upon which to build intercultural exchange and a democratic politics. Critics have pointed to the ways in which this emphasis on universalism too easily glosses over the complexities of pluralism and cross-cultural, trans-national relations and turns a deaf ear to the discordant features of social life (Derrida 2002; Cheah 1998; Papastephanou 2002; Mouffe 2005; Todd 2009a). Their view is that in seeking more peaceful terms of co-existence cosmopolitan theory fails to address adequately the tensions, paradoxes and legitimate conflicts that arise from encounters across cultural differences. Their point is that if cosmopolitan thought can contribute at all to a robust form of democratic life, then it needs to confront the inevitable “agonistic” (Mouffe 2005) dimensions of human interaction. Thus, unlike many cosmopolitan theorists, their emphasis is not so much on promoting harmony through appeals to universal principles, but on the process of turning dissonance into legitimate forms of political struggle.

This paper takes up this critical challenge by exploring the notion of an “agonistic cosmopolitics” as central to the reframing of cosmopolitan education. Cosmopolitics as a term frequently has been used by various theorists to explore the specifically political dimensions of cosmopolitan thought beyond the rigid attachments to universalism (Derrida 2002; Cheah and Robbins 1998; Honig 2006).<sup>4</sup> In these theorists’ hands, cosmopolitics takes a sober view of pluralism, seeing politics as the project of confronting dissonant voices, affiliations, and practices and as such puts into question the cherished political aim of harmonizing diversity through dialogical models of democracy. Moreover, this view of the cosmopolitical interrogates the very status of universalism as a ground for either democracy or projects concerned with global justice. Indeed, some theorists have focused on the idea of translation to highlight the ways in which our claims to universality are always products of particular cultural and linguistic contexts whose meanings cannot be transposed willy nilly onto other contexts, without undergoing considerable alteration (Butler 2000). Thus, in what follows I seek to shift the grounds upon which cosmopolitan theory generally rests. Here I move from a focus on harmony to agonism and from cosmopolitanism to the cosmopolitical, and within each discuss the questions of democracy and universality, respectively. Drawing on the work of Chantal Mouffe, Judith Butler and Bonnie Honig, my point is to discuss the basis upon which our agonistic interactions can inform education in promoting better ways of living together. This requires, in my view, nothing less than a clear understanding of the very difficulties of pluralism and a questioning of some of the ways we often reflect on the political dimension of these difficulties. My overall claim is that cosmopolitanism as a set of ideas that seek more peaceful forms of living together on a global scale is in need of a theoretical framework that faces directly the difficulties of living in a dissonant world.

<sup>4</sup> Archibugi (2003) is an exception here, as are others in the volume *Debating Cosmopolitics* (2003). He discusses a “cosmopolitical democracy” as the internationalization of democracy. In this he advocates that the adherence to a universal perspective on human rights needs to come about through a global institutionalization of democracy.

## From Harmony to Agonism: The Question of Democracy

Properly political questions always involve decisions which require us to make a choice between conflicting alternatives.

(Mouffe 2005, p. 10)

One of the most voluble critiques of cosmopolitanism has come from radical democratic theorist Chantal Mouffe. The target of her criticism is the nature of the very aims of cosmopolitanism, viewed in terms of harmony and consensus. Taking issue with liberal understandings of cosmopolitanism, in particular, she sees that it largely has ignored what she defines as the political. “By ‘the political’ I mean the dimension of antagonism which I take to be constitutive of human societies, while by ‘politics’ I mean the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political” (Mouffe 2005, p. 9). The nature of her critique, which builds on this vision of the political, concerns the ways in which cosmopolitanism seeks to override antagonisms in posing as a “solution” for the difficulties of pluralism. For Mouffe, it is the specifically liberal perspective of pluralism that gives rise to cosmopolitanism’s aims of harmony and consensus, and thus her critique is fundamentally a critique of the “liberal hegemony” which has infused current political thought:

The typical liberal understanding of pluralism is that we live in a world in which there are indeed many perspectives and values and that, owing to empirical limitations, we will never be able to adopt them all, but that, when put together, they constitute an harmonious and non-conflictual ensemble. This is why this type of liberalism must negate the political in its antagonistic dimension (Mouffe 2005, p. 10).

The antagonistic dimension, for Mouffe, is central to rethinking democracy itself, and is that which emerges out of the pluralistic condition of our existence. It is not, therefore, an aggregate model of pluralism she is espousing, but one that deals with the inevitable conflicts that arise out of holding different viewpoints, subject positions, and identifications, which are always amenable to change over time. For her, the plural nature of social life cannot thereby be “overcome,” nor should it be, for if pluralism is to have any political meaning the conflicts it gives rise to need to occupy an important place in any theory of democracy—cosmopolitan or otherwise.

Given Mouffe’s concerns with the antagonistic dimensions of social life, her eschewing of the cosmopolitan project is not surprising. If one examines cosmopolitanism in light of advocates such as Beck (2006), Nussbaum (1997), and Benhabib (2006), one can see a distinct emphasis on the question of how to avoid, remove, or dismiss those troubling aspects of confrontation that pluralism finds. What these theorists portray is a sense of cosmopolitanism that seeks to harmonize dissonance in the name of global or dialogic democracy itself. This kind of cosmopolitanism is grounded in the belief that universal appeals to humanity, rules of deliberation and human rights can actually serve as the backbone for a new global politics.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, if we take seriously Mouffe’s emphasis on bringing the political into conversation with democracy, we end up having to reframe our attention to pluralism, and relinquish the security of those universals into which so much political trust is placed. The issue that

<sup>5</sup> The claims of universalism in cosmopolitanism, as I read them, focus on the political and legal claims of human rights and the moral claims of humanity. In my discussion in the next section, I seek to problematize these claims, partly by challenging their political and moral adequacy with respect to how universalism logically operates to exclude the particular it claims to be accounting for.

Mouffe is at pains to address, then, is how to bring the political (which is necessarily antagonistic) into conversation with democracy, and still take into account the global features of the world in which we currently live. Mouffe herself does this, in part, through two movements. The first concerns her understanding of the relation between pluralism and democracy; the second her views on pluralism in a global politics.

As for the first point, Mouffe's view of pluralism is unavoidably antagonistic, as we have seen above. Drawing on the critique of liberal democracy offered by Carl Schmitt, Mouffe explains that friend/enemy distinctions emerge out of diverse social relations. On this reading, these groupings become central to an oppositional politics of *we/they*, and depict the alternatives out of which political decisions must be made. That is the social distinction of friend/enemy can become a political distinction of *we/they*. But what makes the political different from the social is that these different interests seek to establish hegemony. Hegemony is the practice through which order is established and the meanings of social institutions are "fixed," however incompletely. Hegemony itself is a struggle over which views will hold sway in defining what is politically best for a community. This hegemonic aspect of the political establishes exclusions even as it seeks consensus on the signification of social institutions (2005, p. 18). It creates a "we" in contradistinction to a "they" and therefore cannot promote the kind of harmony that cosmopolitanists hope to achieve. But antagonism, as we all know, can slide into the most hideous forms of violence and create lasting forms of social and political malignancy. All too clearly aware of this tendency, Mouffe parts company with Schmitt, who sees no place for pluralism in democracy, and in the name of democratic pluralism, she seeks to keep the "emergence of antagonism at bay by establishing *we/they* in a different way" (2005, p. 16). However, she concedes, "since all forms of political identities entail a *we/they* distinction, this means that the possibility of emergence of antagonism can never be eliminated." (2005, p. 16). Her point is that we must channel social antagonism into democratically amenable forms of conflict, what she calls "agonism." Agonistic relations are those that recognize opponents as legitimate adversaries, not as friends or enemies. The transformation of antagonism into agonism therefore involves understanding my opponent not in terms of moral categories (good and evil, for instance), but in specifically political terms. "Conflicting parties must recognize that while there is no rational solution to their conflict, they recognize the legitimacy of their opponents" (Mouffe 2005, p. 20). Opponents therefore operate on the recognition that there is a common bond across the parties in conflict—not one based on a synthesis of competing views, but on the idea that political association itself can continue. Thus, for Mouffe, conflicting positions are bound by a "conflictual consensus" about symbolic claims to liberty and equality; but how these are defined, imagined, and communicated are contingent—they are the very stuff of *political* disagreement. Coupled with her view of hegemony, adversaries are therefore always in struggle to establish their views and secure their meanings within social institutions. This in turn gives rise to counter-hegemonic struggles that challenge the reigning hegemony and seek to establish their own interpretations of liberty and equality in the social order. She writes:

Adversaries do fight – even fiercely – but according to a shared set of rules, and their positions, despite being ultimately irreconcilable, are accepted as legitimate perspectives. The fundamental difference between the 'dialogical' and the 'agonistic' perspectives is that the aim of the latter is a profound transformation of the existing power relations and the establishment of a new hegemony (Mouffe 2005, p. 52).

Thus, the agonistic form of democracy Mouffe advocates is a continually evolving, contingent political practice amongst pluralist claims. Viewing democracy as agonistic means reframing the conflict emerging out of pluralism on political terms. And this means rethinking the goals of harmony and consensus, for these undermine democratic struggle. In short, for Mouffe, there can be no democratic possibility without agonism.

The second move she makes in order to bring pluralism into the sphere of global politics (which is connected directly to cosmopolitan aspirations) is her articulation of a “multi-polar” world order. This multi-polar view is one in which takes “pluralism seriously instead of trying to impose one single model on the whole world, even if it is a well-meaning cosmopolitan one” (Mouffe 2005, p. 115). By this, she attempts to hold onto the confrontational nature of pluralism at the same time as heeding the sheer global aspects of that pluralism. Cosmopolitanism, for her, is a dangerous enterprise when it attempts to export a certain view of democracy, particularly through its appeals to universalism. An “enforced” universalization of this universalism is dangerous, according to Mouffe, for it risks alienating those who disagree with the established order imposed upon them. She pulls no punches:

Should we be surprised to witness the emergence of violent resistance? It is high time to wake up from the dream of Westernization and to realize that the enforced universalization of the Western model, instead of bringing peace and prosperity, will lead to ever bloodier reactions on the part of those whose cultures and ways of life are being destroyed by this process. It is also high time to question the belief in the unique superiority of liberal democracy. Such a belief is at the core of the liberal negation of the political and it constitutes a serious obstacle to the recognition that the world, as Schmitt observed, is not a ‘universe’ but a ‘pluriverse’ (Mouffe 2005, pp. 86–87).

In thus seeking to begin from a notion of ‘pluriverse,’ Mouffe’s multi-polar perspective recognizes that differing and contesting worldviews are necessary to the very functioning of democracy itself on a global scale. Rather than seeing the “world” as one, as a possible signifier of global unity and identification as many cosmopolitanists do, Mouffe insists instead on the polyvocalism inherent to pluralism, which ought to be allowed to express counter-hegemonic political practices, even when those practices do not necessarily fit neatly into (narrow) models of liberal democracy. Thus, global democracy is not about a particular kind of democracy defined through harmony and consensus, but an agonistic, political struggle in which dissonance plays a central role. Democracy, then, is not something to be defined as fixed, with universally-agreed upon discursive rules, but is fundamentally a transformative, political process through which different voices compete for their place in the political order. As long as political association around the struggle to define liberty and equality is allowed to thrive and as long as democratic institutions continue to exist, there are an infinite number of ways that democracy can make its appearance. In a global context, Mouffe’s multi-polar view is an attempt to give credence to the dissonance to be heard on a global scale.

With respect to the issues currently being raised around the wearing of Muslim dress to schools, Mouffe’s position suggests that a specifically political language needs to be developed in order to address the competing claims that are being made by various constituents. That is, rather than simply viewing that wearing *hijab* or *niqab*, for example, are automatically antithetical to liberal democracy, the more interesting question is raised as to how Muslim women and girls define their interests on political terms and what relation these interests have to democratic principles. How, for instance, do some women and girls’

understand their liberty and equality as being enabled through their various sartorial practices? That is, if appearance in public is dependent upon a display of modesty, how might certain dress actually enable participation for Muslim women in the public sphere? It is not that we can ever hope to answer these questions once and for all; I think the point is to move away from treating these issues simply on moral terms: that these women “ought” not to dress in ways that provoke conventional western sensibilities. Instead, taking the multi-polar perspective seriously means opening up a space of legitimate contestation, where the views of Muslim women and girls are not only a matter of resistance to integration, but can be understood as different ways of exercising liberty and equality. As Mouffe herself suggests, it is not that we need to agree, or to come to consensus over the content of the meanings these terms have for all, universally, but that we need to see that agonistic struggles over these terms are the very stuff of democratic politics.

The shift from harmony to agonism, in my view, contributes to what I am calling an agonistic cosmopolitics in three ways: (1) it gives an unsentimental account of pluralism as having profound meaning in defining political life; (2) it grants different views an agonistic role in the formation of democratic politics; and (3) it offers a *political* language (not a dialogical one) for understanding conflict and how to shape it into democratic practice. What this means in terms of my cosmopolitical emphasis is that although Mouffe herself avoids the term cosmopolitan, her emphasis on agonism in a multi-polar perspective allows for a rethinking of the terms by which we engage pluralism on a global scale and through which it might be possible to conceive democracy beyond the universalistic tendencies of dialogue and consensus. At the same time, because of her resistance to any cosmopolitan language, her critique can seem a bit blunt, particularly when compared with how other theorists have taken up more nuanced critiques of cosmopolitanism, the democratic models it relies upon, and the aspects of universality it raises. Thus, while her position informs my own here in the three ways mentioned above, I turn now to explore other critical visions, without losing the language of cosmopolitanism altogether.

### **From Cosmopolitanism to Cosmopolitics: The Question of Universality**

One of the central critiques of cosmopolitanism has been its emphasis on various types of universalism (e.g., Cheah 1998; Hall 2002; Mignolo 2002). Thus, for theorists who seek to hold onto cosmopolitanism in terms of its focus on intercultural exchange, the universal tendencies of human rights and universal humanity become deeply problematic. Universals are always abstractions that nonetheless attempt to account for particular circumstances. The central problem, as we shall see, is that cosmopolitan forms of universalism seem to betray the very idea of intercultural exchange in that they remain resistant to modification in the face of diverse cultural traditions, histories and meaning systems. Pheng Cheah (1998), for one, advocates developing a critical distance from modern, older-style cosmopolitanism, with its emphasis on a world federation and which “fosters universally communicable values and pleasures” (p. 291). She goes so far as to claim that “no one can in good faith return fully to this robust sense of cosmopolitical culture. Few are now convinced of its rational-universalist grounding” (p. 291). Instead, Cheah proposes abandoning our attachments to universalism and to develop instead our attention to the political features of particular cosmopolitan experiences.

A more nuanced, but equally critical, position is developed by Walter Mignolo (2002) in his focus on a critical cosmopolitanism. Mignolo connects the problem of universalism with past and current forms of colonialism. The universalization of human rights and

democracy, for instance, needs to be questioned, according to Mignolo, while retaining the intercultural dimensions of worldly coexistence. He proposes a shift in thought from universality to diversity:

Diversity can be imagined as a new medievalism, a pluricentric world built on the ruins of ancient, non-Western cultures and civilizations with the debris of Western civilization. A cosmopolitanism that only connects from the center of the large circle outward, and leaves the outer places disconnected from each other, would be cosmopolitanism from above, like Vitoria's and Kant's cosmopolitanism in the past and Rawls's and Habermas's cosmopolitanism today, and like the implications of human rights discourse, according to which only one philosophy has it 'right' (2002, 183–4).

What this emphasis on diversity brings to the fore is the idea of a cosmopolitanism that is both pluralistic in its advocacy of certain claims to universality and self-reflective of the exclusions and omissions committed under its name. In linking cosmopolitanism to colonialism, Mignolo questions the innocence of cosmopolitan calls for universal rights that continue to operate in a top-down fashion and that thereby risk undermining cosmopolitanism's own self-proclaimed openness to other cultures. Hence the need for a critical approach to cosmopolitanism that keeps a watchful eye on the political dimensions of universal claims.

The deep suspicion of universalism, then, comes largely from those who privilege pluralism (and all the difficulties pluralism entails) over universalism in their cosmopolitan projects. Indeed, it is the question of how to think about universality as it comes into contact with specific cultural practices that is at stake in these types of suspicions. Taking a stand against any robust conception of universalism, on the basis that it weakens the very commitment to cultural exchange it seeks to be underpinning, Amanda Anderson (1998) puts forth an alternative vision. "Ultimately, a too rigorous or bald universalism seems at odds, for the cosmopolitan, with the requisite moral task of developing delicate inter-subjective competence within a culturally diverse horizon" (275). She defines this "delicate intersubjective competence" as "join[ing] the language of universalist ethics with an emphasis entirely foreign to that tradition—the emphasis on tact, sensibility, and judgment (*phronesis*), which seem fundamental to the cosmopolitan's reconfigured relation to universality" (275).

What Anderson (1998) is keen to express is that if cosmopolitanists actually take seriously the pluralistic aspects of their project, then the very universals they propose would necessarily be transformed through their contact with other cultural practices and ways of life—other, that is, to the western, modern contexts in which these claims of universality are made. She puts into question what meaning pluralism actually has for certain cosmopolitans if universals are always allowed to trump local traditions, languages, and meaning systems. Although highly critical of universalism, she is careful not to abandon universality altogether on the grounds that making claims of a universal nature necessarily informs any political work we do. Nonetheless what is required is new orientation to these claims—an attention to the ways they operate in specific contexts, and thus become subject to change:

This does not mean we should not deploy the term *universal*; we should in fact continuously attempt to give it fuller articulation, so as to include groups that have hitherto been excluded from its purview. One key way to forward this goal is to set different conceptions of universality and of rights in dialogue with one another, in order to aggravate our awareness of cultural divergence and to hone our capacity for

transformative intercultural encounters. Thus emerges the call for *translation* ... (Anderson 1998, p. 281).

In this way, universalism does not act as an anchoring point for intercultural exchange; rather new articulations of universality are instead occasioned by that very exchange. This means that claims to universality (human rights, humanity, rational communication) are themselves subject to translation as they come into contact with a new set of cultural and linguistic practices.

Even more importantly, however, as Judith Butler (2000) points out, all claims to universality are always already products of cultural translation.<sup>6</sup> That is, it is not only that universals undergo transformation through their translation *into* specific, and possibly foreign, contexts (although this is a crucial point), but they are only articulated in the first place *within* languages and systems of thought that are bounded by culture. Importantly, culture does not signify a fixed or uni-dimensional entity. For Butler, cultures rather are constituted through complex processes of signification and articulation; they are living practices. And claims to universality always therefore are involved in processes of articulation that continually “translate” particular cases into abstract generalities and back again. Thus, when we say that a claim to universality is bounded by culture it is already an act of cultural translation. “No notion of universality can rest easily within the notion of a single ‘culture’, since the very concept of universality compels an understanding of culture as a relation of exchange and a task of translation” (2000, pp. 24–25).

This has important implications for cosmopolitanism insofar as it seeks to employ universals on the global stage. Butler writes:

...there is no cultural consensus on an international level about what ought and ought not to be a claim to universality, who may make it, and what form it ought to take. Thus, for the claim to work, for it to compel consensus, and for the claim, performatively, to enact the very universality it enunciates, it must undergo a series of translations into the various rhetorical and cultural contexts in which the meaning and force of universal claims are made. Significantly, this means that no assertion of universality takes place apart from a cultural norm, and, given the array of contesting norms that constitute the international field, no assertion can be made without at once requiring a cultural translation. Without translation, the very concept of universality cannot cross the linguistic borders it claims, in principle, to be able to cross. Or we might put it another way: without translation, the only way the assertion of universality can cross a border is through a colonial and expansionist logic (2000, p. 35).

The upshot here is that insofar as claims to universality are culturally bounded they are necessarily part of a field of “contesting norms,” of antagonistic perspectives. Despite the best of intentions, these claims cannot act as free-floating standards abstracted from the actual local contexts in which they find new expression. Butler’s point is that if we do not heed the ways these claims of universality function differently in diverse contexts, we end up merely asserting their “rightness” and ignore the very pluralism they seek to address. Thus, universality is unintelligible outside of efforts to translate its meaning within the very contexts it claims to be accounting for.

So instead of cosmopolitanism being informed by a universalism that “promise[s] moral guidance to the wayward human world below,” as Bonnie Honig puts it (2006 p. 102),

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of universalism as cultural translation, see Todd (2009b); for a discussion of the many faces of translation, see Bergdahl (2009).

universality as a process of cultural translation actually enables a far more rigorous encounter with pluralism. On this view, universality does not stand outside of the tensions that arise out of contesting perspectives, but instead is shaped, moulded, and recast each time it is articulated within the field of such perspectives. Thus, it is the struggle for intelligibility—the struggle to translate universals—that lies at the very crux of cosmopolitanism as a specifically political project.

This view of universality as translation, however, implies a paradox: that universals are articulated as universal (as generalizable) yet through their articulation in language and culture they are therefore also particular. Honig (2006) maps out this paradox in political terms, which she sees as necessarily agonistic.<sup>7</sup> She draws on Derrida's reading of hospitality to develop the idea that the cosmopolitan claim to universal human rights at once invites *unconditionally* all humans into its fold at the same time as democratic states (and other organs) through which rights are granted do so *conditionally* (that is through citizenship and other categories of membership, such as permanent resident, and adherence to treaties). Universal claims are never entirely free of the conditional, and therefore they are by necessity limited in reach, scope and outcome. Yet by claiming themselves universal, they always invoke the unconditional, they always gesture to welcoming all. This *unconditional* hospitality, then, is both expressed and betrayed in any articulation of universal human rights, because the *conditional* expression of rights is necessarily hostile to those who are excluded from its purview. Taken together, hospitality as it appears in universal rights, is signified by a double term: host/hostility (2006, p. 108). As Honig emphasizes, it is not that this aporia can be erased; human rights are imperfect in that their very universalism always excludes the particularities of lived realities, of actually lived lives. To illustrate her point, Honig reads Hannah Arendt's call for the "right to have rights"<sup>8</sup> as indicative of this aporetic logic: "A double gesture is necessary because, paradoxically, we need rights because we cannot trust the political communities to which we belong to treat us with dignity and respect; however, we depend for our rights on those very same political communities" (2006, p. 107).

The issue, for Honig, is neither to theorize away the paradoxes that inhere in universal claims to rights nor to act as though we just have to perfect our universalism into a pure set of principles. She writes: "from the vantage point of the unconditional... even a full realization of universal human rights on earth would be seen as necessitating further political work, generating new claims, each of which would make its own universal appeal, perhaps on behalf of those forms of life remaindered by the order of universal human rights, which is itself a conditional order" (Honig 2006, p. 111). In this sense, the political can be seen to be an on-going series of struggles over intelligibility. Moreover, I would add, it is an on-going series of struggles for hegemony in the Mouffeian sense that new claims seek their place in establishing new power relations, relations in which those claims

<sup>7</sup> Honig does not define agonism in the same way Mouffe does. Instead she employs the term in conjunction with cosmopolitics to signal the tensions and paradoxes that exist in politics, which cannot simply be done away with by focusing on better laws and rules within states. Her discussion of this is within the context of a commentary on Seyla Benhabib's (2006) Berkeley Tanner Lectures, published as *Another Cosmopolitanism*. Mouffe claims that her vision of agonism—which I am drawing on here—differs in that it does not focus on the political as a "space of freedom and deliberation" but as a "space of conflict and antagonism" (2005, p. 131 n9). Although Honig does have a more Arendtian flavour to her sense of agonism, I do not read her as advocating the political as a deliberative space.

<sup>8</sup> Arendt (1951/2004, pp. 341–384) discusses this phrase in the context of post-war stateless persons. See Todd (2009a) for a treatment of this in relation to education.

that are left out, forgotten, or “remaindered” are the basis for new political work toward instituting democratic change.

With the recognition that universals function according to the paradoxical logic of the unconditional/conditional, Honig claims that this should inform a more self-reflective and self-transformational approach to universalism and cosmopolitanism:

Put a different way: If we expect hospitality always to harbor a trace of its double – hostility – then proponents of hospitality will always be on the lookout for that trace and its remainders. The same goes for universalism or cosmopolitanism. And that wariness will surface in our politics, often in the form of a double gesture, in which the promises *and* risks of a particular conditional order of hospitality (and universalism or cosmopolitanism) are both named and confronted (Honig 2006, pp. 111–112).

Thus, like Butler, Honig does not simply abandon the political task of universality, but shifts the terms through which we can engage more self-reflectively with it. Within the framework of cosmopolitanism in particular, Honig seeks new terms of reference that retain the paradoxical nature of politics (through its attachments to universals) and that see politics as on-going struggles for intelligibility that cannot be resolved in some final form of harmony or consensus. Echoing Mouffe (although not directly drawing on her), Honig names an “agonistic cosmopolitics” as a way of emphasizing her commitment to the double gesture: “An agonistic cosmopolitics locates itself squarely in the paradox of founding, that irresolvable and productive paradox in which a future is claimed on behalf of peoples and rights that are not yet and may never be” (2006, p. 117).

Although my own use of the term of “agonistic cosmopolitics” (which I discuss further below) differs from Honig’s, particularly in its Mouffean emphasis on agonism, the vigilant, self-reflective aspect of her view (as way of keeping open the paradoxes our universal impulses create) captures well the political difficulties we need to face within the framework of cosmopolitics. What is central, of course, here is how these universals need to be seen as being transformable—malleable, that is, in relation to their being claimed and reclaimed by those whose political existence we have not yet even foreseen. What this means is that Honig’s agonistic cosmopolitics gestures toward an unanticipated future, a future that can be neither planned nor regulated through predefined principles. Her cosmopolitical vision, therefore, is not about providing a global recipe for politics, but is about learning to live in those paradoxical spaces inevitably created through the transformation of universals in unpredictable ways.

If we return to the issue of Muslim dress in schools, what Honig’s and Butler’s comments make so plain is how we can never simply assert universal principles (about liberty and equality, for instance) as though they can be assumed to speak for all transparently. That is, it is only through cultural, religious, and linguistic practices that freedom and equality come to have meaning. Indeed, it is in the process of translation through which claims to universality are made that they can be made intelligible at all. When Muslim dress is unequivocally perceived to be inappropriate to the so-called western value of equality, what is actually being claimed about this value and who gets to decide whose definition of equality counts? It is not as if claims to universality in political projects have not altered over time and place—human rights, civil liberties, and foundational political universals such as liberty and equality are continually being expanded to include previously excluded groups—the point is how do we acknowledge their changing nature within specific contexts? For instance, if some Muslim women choose to wear *hijab* because it enables them to negotiate the sexual politics at their place of study, does this not provide us with new possible articulations of equality upon which to re-engage our own commitments

to it? Honig's point is that these types of exchanges open up toward the unanticipated future of politics and occasion a more self-reflexive stance with respect to the kinds of claims to universality we are making. Without this kind of self-interrogation, we risk responding to Muslim women and girls with school expulsion and social ostracism from an already pre-defined position of what equality is and how one ought to live in order to fulfil it. From the point of view of universality (as opposed to universalism) there is on-going recognition of the dissonance that is necessarily part and parcel of our different articulations of universal claims. So the point of a cosmopolitical project is not to make the dissonance between these different articulations disappear but rather to make them audible.

Taken together, the issues raised here with respect to the question of universalism in the shift from cosmopolitanism to cosmopolitics centre on three points: (1) that universality is itself a product of cultural translation and as such it enables us to see how our claims of universality are open to transformation as they come into play in diverse cultural contexts; (2) that such claims are contingent upon contesting norms and antagonistic perspectives and thus subject to struggles over intelligibility and signification; and (3) that the paradoxical aspects of politics commits us to continual self-interrogation of these claims we are making and focuses attention on keeping alive the possibility for renewal and transformation. These points, along with the others already mentioned, inform how I understand an agonistic cosmopolitics as a framework for addressing issues of cultural conflict in education. It is to this I now turn.

### **Agonistic Cosmopolitics, Dissonance and Education**

I began this paper by giving some of the flavour of the current debates about the wearing of Muslim forms of dress to schools. What is resonant in these discussions are the ways in which these gendered cultural practices have been taken up in terms of their perceived divergence from western liberal standards of liberty and equality to the point that these girls (and women teachers) have been (or are threatened with being) expelled from public educational institutions. Elsewhere, I have discussed these issues from within the frameworks of nationalism and human rights (Todd 2009a, *in press*) to show how these girls and women are frequently caught within the conflicting demands of the nation state without being treated as political subjects in their own right. That is, debates often focus on how their clothing acts as an affront to supposedly universal liberal democratic sensibilities of freedom and equality, with very little concern for how these women and girls interpret and signify freedom and equality through their adherence to religious and/or cultural tradition.<sup>9</sup> It is not simply a question of reaching consensus over what liberty and equality mean for all everywhere; rather it is the more difficult task of recognizing new significations as essential to democratic forms of life in the era of globalization we now live in.

There is thus an exigency in facing the difficulties of pluralism. As I suggested above, we all know how easy antagonisms can erupt into devastating violence and destroy the social and political fabric of communities. What I have argued here is that cosmopolitanism, so long as it remains immune to dissonant voices lacks a framework for taking its opponents seriously. And by dissonant, I truly mean those voices that refuse to sing along

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<sup>9</sup> I write "and/or" here, for it is not always for clearly purely religious reasons that women and girls wear various forms of Muslim dress. At times it has to do with regulating the sexual politics of western societies, at other times, with family tradition; moreover, which kind of sartorial practice is chosen has also of course to do with ethnic custom.

to a harmonious tune composed by others, and which has become the single song being played on the global airwaves. The agonistic cosmopolitical framework I am gesturing toward brings these voices into a new type of political arrangement, one that grants weight to new articulations of universality through agonistic relations.

This means, then, that an agonistic cosmopolitics diverges from cosmopolitanism's view of dialogical models of democracy based on harmony and consensus and from its view of universalism as a non-political, immutable series of claims about rights and humanity. It instead embraces both democracy and universality, but with a strong emphasis on the pluralistic nature of social life. This means, as I have discussed above, embracing a democracy that reframes the difficulties of pluralism within a "multi-polar" perspective that offers a vibrant, political engagement with the antagonistic dimensions of human interaction. It also means a commitment to universality that recognizes itself as a signifying practice, always engaged in acts of cultural translation and thereby subject to alteration, modification, and refinement. Without this transformative capacity, both democracy and universality would congeal into a stagnant politics, intractable in its aims and colonizing in its impulse. But what keeps both democracy and universality alive in an agonistic cosmopolitics is the very attention to pluralism—whether named in terms of diverse communities, intercultural exchange, a pluriverse, or diversality—and to allow this pluralism to inform and transform our most cherished assumptions, theories, concepts, and principles. An agonistic cosmopolitics is in its profoundest sense an engagement with human plurality as a definitive feature of co-existence.

This does not mean accepting, acquiescing to, agreeing with, or merely tolerating different views; this would be absurd. However, it does require a sustained openness to listen to other perspectives and to counter and respond. It requires treating each other as legitimate adversaries who are engaged in debate and struggle over meaning within a set of contesting norms and competing perspectives. An agonistic cosmopolitics is mindful of pluralism without romanticizing or vilifying it. One aspect of this on a global stage, whether in encounters in lands foreign to us, or in encounters at a home we share with others, involves continual self-interrogation about our claims of universality: at once unconditional/conditional they are always incomplete; they exclude, marginalize, forget at the same time as they act as a welcoming invitation to all. They present us with a paradox whose knot can never be undone but whose threads we worry in the constant search for better, more complete, and less imposing claims.

With respect to the apparent antagonism over Muslim dress in schools, it is clear that from the perspective of an agonistic cosmopolitics that three things need to happen. First, the social antagonism (which is not simply perceived, but is marked by school expulsion) needs to be transformed into a form of political agonism. This would mean treating participants in the debate as legitimate adversaries—so long as those actors are bound by conflictual consensus about the democratic necessity of liberty and equality and its institutions, then how they seek to define the content of this is left to political struggle. This would enable Muslim women and girls to signify these terms in light of their own concerns (which are by no means homogeneous). Second, such resignification would be a recognized act of cultural translation through which universal principles of liberty and equality are no longer simply "applied" to individual cases, but undergo continual re-articulation. Muslim women and girls would thereby also be engaged in struggles of intelligibility, that is, struggles over what liberty and equality mean within the context of their cultural/religious traditions. Third, in recognizing the transformable nature of universals, conditions are created that "aggravate our awareness... and hone our capacity for transformative intercultural encounters" (Anderson 1998, p. 281). This means that the very struggle for

intelligibility as a political process keeps us mindful of the ways in which universal claims—even those that are well intentioned—are always incomplete and actually depend on dissonant voices for their re-articulation. Thus, this third point speaks to the need to slip off the mantle of hubris on the part of political actors and school authorities who seek to define for Muslim women and girls the right way of being and belonging.

Although this paper has only sketched out the beginnings of what an agonistic cosmopolitics can look like, what I hope has been made clear is that it can offer education another kind of political language through which issues of conflict are not swept under the magic carpets of harmony, consensus and universalism. Learning to live better together requires facing the very difficulties embedded in that living, where not everyone's voice sings to the same tune. This is definitely not to suggest that facing pluralism is *only* difficult, but merely that the contentiousness that inevitably arises out of different worldviews requires an approach that takes these views seriously. Otherwise we risk, in the name of high-handed principles, silencing those very voices that provide counterpoint and texture to the score of our interactions. Rethinking how we engage our different voices is both a political exigency, particularly for those who are continually threatened with harassment and school expulsion, and a future-oriented commitment to educating for living in a dissonant world—a world that is both now and not yet, a world, we might say, without a theme song.

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