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Academic citizenship and a world in crisis

Stephen Carney

Abstract

In this paper I consider how the university might contribute to a regenerated commons. I discuss the problems of global citizenship as a heuristic, putting in its place, Appiah's notion of cosmopolitanism to describe the Global Humanities bachelor program at my own higher education institution—Roskilde University in Denmark. I then consider the academic citizen as one participating in a space of dialogue and exchange where differences are recognized and the world is read through the lens of pluralism rather than over-confident and singular commitments to social justice, human rights or some idealized commons that threatens yet another dominant/dominating worldview. I end the paper with a reflection on the theme of hopelessness—viewing universities as central to creating academic citizens geared to the logic of deficit-thinking, endless development and abstract progress. Rather than trying to overcome hopelessness, we might be better advised to embrace it as one aspect of a broad and inclusive humanistic imagination; one where there are many knowledges but where most will not be encountered, and where there are no simple solutions.

Key words: cosmopolitanism; global citizenship; global humanities; humanistic imagination

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Our current situation

Times are tough, so much so that we struggle to find names and emotions to do them justice. Bruno Latour speaks of 'formidable' problems of human origin, questioning whether we, as the authors of our own ruin, have the insight and capacity to confront let alone reverse the coming end. Where to start in the absence of a 'ground control station' to receive our pleas? What greater authority exists when the sublime has 'evaporated'—replaced by a humanity that has 'scaled up so much that it has become the main geological force shaping the Earth' (Latour, 2017, pp. 21–22). We face a time of disconnect, staggering somewhere between

comprehending the enormity of what is happening and our capacity to respond intellectually and emotionally.

The United Nations Educational, Science and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), in its recent report, *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education* (UNESCO, 2021), gives a more sober analysis of the state of things, making it clear that the challenges of climate change cannot be solved by innovations in climate science alone. We face a ‘turning point’, illustrated most clearly by growing social and economic inequality, political extremism, democratic ‘backsliding’, alienating technological changes and undeniable planetary exhaustion. Education is seen as central to achieving sustainable futures but is framed as having contributed to our problems through alienating pedagogies and content, as well as by the creeping acceptance of neo-liberal ideologies that individualize subjects and create unhealthy forms of competition. The Report describes the need to establish a new social contract built upon pedagogies of cooperation and solidarity with curricula that prioritize fact and truth and where interdisciplinary strategies seek out connections across fields of knowledge, cultures, and species. Education should become inclusive of ideas, spaces, and peoples, with its purpose shifted from the pursuit of individual achievement to collective well-being. To achieve these transformations, UNESCO (2021) envisages a new educational commons crafted around shared goals, knowledges and goods, and built upon the notion of learning as a shared activity where its governance is secured by the integration of public and private actors and their often contradictory interests. Intellectual property must be made available for sharing, not given over to the highest bidder. The challenge to democratize knowledge gives universities a central place in this vision, with the demand that they extend their commitments to cooperation across borders and double their efforts to support the public sphere and common good. We will need a new type of university, and the university will need to fashion a new type of learner, one able to embrace the ‘pluriverse’ in our midst and develop the capacity to challenge the ‘abyssal’ thinking and practices that have succeeded to obscure the majority of the world’s knowledges from the main global centers of knowledge production (de Sousa Santos, 2015).

Most diagnoses of our global situation are similarly bleak, with responses, at least those from agencies like UNESCO, questioned for high levels of abstraction or political naivety. Latour (2017) suggests that our growing sense of resignation can be traced to the way things are put together and presented to us. To make sense of the disconnect we experience between crisis and our capacity to feel and act, he suggests that we must first grasp the scalar dynamics at play. From this perspective, global crises—of climate, democracy, meaning and truth, to take some of the most

pressing matters before us—are more easily understood as assemblages of peoples, institutions and politics, morals and values, fears and hopes and of course unending streams of data; all of which structure and construct what we perceive and experience. This is not to suggest that actual ice is not melting from the only two poles we have. Rather, understanding the ‘theatre of the globe’ (Latour, 2017, p. 25) means that we can begin to poke at it, finding alternative ways to view and reassemble things, gaining new purchase on problems. Rather than view the present as one enormous house of cards, we could begin to explore what Latour (2017) calls the ‘tapestry’ of nodal points and connections that constitute how the world is presented to us. And begin to reweave that. This might offer a glimmer of hope, if hope is of any use to us at this late stage. Irrespective of how one wishes to approach this assemblage—while recognizing that Latour makes no mention of the complicity of universities in a neo-liberal project that contributes to the crisis—it certainly invites institutions of higher learning to consider how best to educate and prepare their students so that they can engage with an age of complexity, interconnectivity, and radical uncertainty.

Producing the global citizen through education

In the Western tradition, ideas of citizenship can be traced to ancient Athens and have unsurprisingly proliferated wildly in education—not least universities—as institutions and programs seek to address some of the issues outlined here. *Global citizenship* includes an awareness of difference and connection, a respect for others and a commitment to engagement. For some, it is about moving beyond singular and privileged world views and developing in students a ‘moral compass’ with which to ‘think through their responsibilities and rights’ in a world of billions (Altinay, 2010, as cited in Green, 2012, p. 2). In pedagogical terms, this ‘ethical and political commitment to the world and others in the world’ demands a ‘willingness to interrogate the geopolitical foundations of knowledge and knowledge production, and an incentive to act in the world based on these commitments’ (Warren, 2019, p. 9).

Such perspectives do not have free reign. The rise of discourses of economic integration, competition and human capital, and the capture of universities into the logic of global markets, have led to a surge of interest in the international dimension of higher education, both for programs aiming explicitly to create mobile internationally-oriented graduates as well as for those who stay at home (Warren, 2019). The obvious critique here is that the language of skills promoted by agencies such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and

the European Union (EU) degrade the traditional focus in universities on the formation of democratic *Bildung* (Moos, 2018). *Outcomes, comparative assessments of achievement, global learning standards* and so forth, for all their worth, take us some way from the great questions of what it is to be human, how to live and to what ends. Concerns for world or global citizenship must therefore take account of how universities define their purpose in an increasingly ill-liberal world.

The challenge to global citizenship education doesn't only come from externally imposed neo-liberal political ideology. One can also note within its DNA a persistent 'imperial project of civilization' that, whilst aiming at inclusiveness, creates the distinctions needed to justify intervening in the world via the creation of others in need of saving (Jefferess, 2008). From this perspective, global citizenship education attempts to create an imagined community, one guided by the values and dispositions of 'liberal patriarchal capitalism' with its attendant 'conceptions of rationality, order, and civility' (Mohanty, 2003, as cited in Jefferess, 2008, p. 29). The push for global citizenship thus contributes to furthering a *particular* understanding of our common world and a certain type of moral individual exercising free will in the pursuit of supposedly shared goals, all the while legitimating a new form of (supra) state influence in education. Perhaps we see in statements such as those from UNESCO (2021), a well-intentioned but ill-directed attempt to repurpose a struggling project of belonging that inadvertently creates new singularities and hierarchies that reinforce the worst of our old order.

How are we to make sense of all this as we think more carefully about the form and content of programs concerned in some way with the question of academic citizenship? In their review of universities offering global citizenship programs, Aktas and colleagues (2016) focus upon the dominance of two approaches: a 'neo-liberal' orientation that promotes transferable competences for mobile employees, and a 'radical' or 'conflict' strand that acknowledges the role of education in the production of global inequalities. In the 'neo-liberal' strand, the focus is on what Shultz (2007) describes as integrating global citizenship into the structures of the global economy. For Rizvi (2007), this runs the danger of further marginalizing some groups whilst legitimating their status as impediments to the realization of prosperous futures. In the 'critical' strand, global power relations and inequalities are in focus with the aim to empower students to identify and challenge 'the hegemony of economic globalization and build solidarity across marginalized groups to fight oppression' where it is viewed as essential that students examine their own 'personal and cultural mind-sets' as a prerequisite to advocacy (Aktas et al., 2016, p. 5). Whilst reflecting clear differences, both of the approaches above can nevertheless be viewed as continuing to position the student in a privileged position, encouraging some form of moral authority over those with whom they

seek to engage (Jefferess, 2008). In the US context, a surprising number of programs place emphasis on the *certification* of students as global citizens, treating as secondary the need for personal transformation and affinity with marginalized cultures and peoples. Whilst Aktas and colleagues (2016) note the potential hegemonic status of English-language study programs, and the important place of foreign language learning in some programs, there is no reflection in their own analysis on the status and place of hegemonic knowledge production processes more generally.

Global Humanities as a form of cosmopolitanism

Most globally oriented study programs at the higher education level are based in the social sciences where macro-sociological and organizational issues (supra and national) are the focus of concern. Programs are usually grounded in fields such as international relations, anthropology, development and regional studies. Increasingly, though, global humanities programs attempt to blend perspectives from the social sciences with those from the humanities. Here, programs explore different literary, philosophical, linguistic, and artistic practices, as well as thematic interests in such things as culturally specific ethics, histories of racism and colonialism, embodied memories, narratives of migration and the effects of media flows on identities and subjectivities. There are of course many additional ways that ‘the global’ is being addressed in university programs, but the tropes of world citizenship, cosmopolitan belonging and critical advocacy are prevalent in most.

My own higher education institution, Roskilde University in Denmark, has attempted to address many of the challenges introduced here through its Global Humanities bachelor program. This three-year, interdisciplinary degree approaches ‘the global’ with a transnational perspective where issues of interconnection, mobility (of peoples, ideas, technologies, etc.) and diversity of thought are in focus. Whilst the so-called ‘traditional’ humanities subjects provide the building blocks for study activities, students are encouraged to consider how they can be understood across disciplines *and* cultural contexts. This latter aspect requires attention to epistemological diversity, especially perspectives that are marginalized or otherwise beyond the scope of much of the Western tradition of humanistic thought. The aim here is to help students understand that different knowledges are required to engage with transnational encounters and that the classic ‘toolkit’ of academic resources (including dominant theories, ‘scientific’ methods, field techniques and disembodied and analytical approaches to writing) can be problematized as complicating or, even, undermining the possibilities for global dialogue and for

what Southern scholars refer to as epistemic justice (e.g. de Sousa Santos, 2015; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

This intellectual vision builds on the existing structure of Roskilde University's unique model of bachelor education that, in many ways, anticipates the types of global challenges identified by UNESCO (2021). The core of the Roskilde experience lies in a commitment to group-based, problem-oriented project work where students devise areas for study that speak to their own engagements with problems, studying specific issues that are exemplary of larger concerns. To support the progressive development of project work skills, 'dimension' courses cover key orientations from the humanities that are placed in dialogue with 'minor' thought from the Global South and elsewhere. This 'elsewhere' includes engagement with myth and superstition, the magical and performative, literary modes of expression, embodied as well as more-than-human approaches to expressing meaning. The aim, acknowledged here as ambitious, is to challenge and move the abyssal lines established within the Western university; lines that maintain the privileged place of realist, critical, universal, binary and scientific enquiry (Silova, 2021). The focus, then, shifts to *knowledges* for the humanities and an often uncomfortable engagement with epistemological diversity that requires students to consider the position(s) from which they are working, the implicit commitments embedded in those positions and what—if anything—these mean for their own knowledge production processes. The result is an expansive *humanistic* imagination, one that seeks to do justice to the complexities and richness of the world, actively produced in the microcosm of the classroom.

It is here that we return to the idea of the academic citizen, one participating in a space of dialogue and exchange where differences are recognized and the world is read through the lens of pluralism rather than over-confident commitments to social justice, human rights or some idealized commons that threatens yet another dominant/dominating worldview. For Appiah (2006), this is at the core of a cosmopolitan disposition with the belief 'that there are many values worth living by and that you cannot live by them all' (as cited in Jefferess, 2008, p. 30). Rather than rely upon the trope of global citizenship with its implicit narrative of hope and tendency to 'universalize human experience as a means of producing affinity or moral regard', this cosmopolitanism 'constitutes a moral obligation to the other despite perceived differences' (Appiah, 2006, as cited in Jefferess, 2008, p. 30). Some consequences of such cosmopolitan ethics will be the invitation to self-understanding rather than societal improvement, and to personal awareness rather than global betterment. In the process, we may begin to understand something of how the Other (whoever and whatever that may be) will view and understand our motives and engagements in the world. Latour explains it in terms of the questions

‘what world is it that you are assembling, with which people do you align yourselves, with what entities are you proposing to live’ (Latour, 2017, p. 27).

Our hopeless future

Mirroring Latour’s (2017) analysis, many of my students talk of hopelessness—the hopelessness of saving the planet, of finding that dream job and a desirable place to live, and in realizing an exceptional life; one that *makes a difference*. Situated in the Danish context, they also link hopelessness to the humanities where so many of their high school teachers and mentors, family, friends and Danish opinion formers (not least their own university leaders!) read their academic passions through the lens of what is ‘useful’, ‘practical’ and ‘essential’. Planet, job, relationship, life, purpose, and action: daunting assemblages that require nerves of steel if one is to go on with purpose. Perhaps the bitter truth is that we exist in ‘hopeless ecosystems’ that depend upon ‘learned helplessness or psychological deficits’ and maintain a system of competition and control as well as diligence and despair (Hall, 2020, p. 840). Hope, as Latour (2017) notes, rather than driving us on to better and greater things, might actually be the ‘source of our melancholia and the cause of our cognitive dissonance’ (p. 30). Deal with that and the end of the world may begin to look a little more distant.

The type of hopelessness fueled by the university ‘ruptures the Self’, and rather than contribute further to the forces of capital both in and outside the academy, educators might instead encourage an ability to ‘sit with hopelessness, or to exist without hope’—this might enable us to dwell in the world, rather than conform to the university’s ‘insistence that we labor to control it’ (Hall, 2020, pp. 840–841). One way to do this is by developing an awareness of other world views where notions of hope, purpose and progress take on different forms. Whether that be through engagement with Kyoto School philosophy that questions the ‘ontologizing of autonomous individualism and abstract universalism’ that is typical of global citizenship theories (Yano & Rapple, 2022 p. 10), indigenous belief systems that connect past, present and future to belonging in and with nature (Country et al., 2016) or, for example, the transgressive and performative research strategies characteristic of post-foundational approaches to knowledge production in the West—all traditions introduced to students in the Roskilde Program. A broad humanistic imagination enables us to look differently at crises and their alleged consequences, as well as the solutions regularly offered up by policy makers, commentators and their scholarly partners.

Many will dismiss these musings as yet another form of hopelessness; one fueled by idealism or apathy or—at worst—some form of uncaring nihilism. However, to think in such terms would be an invitation to reflect on why we feel it necessary to imbue the humanities with narrow demands, political commitments and values that always come from somewhere. The cosmopolitan ethics offered too briefly here are an essential aspect of a humanistic imagination. This perspective acknowledges the relationship between ‘personal troubles’ and ‘public issues’ outlined by Wright Mills (1959, p. 8) but refuses to give precedence to identifying the structural determinates of our misery or what he saw as the essential characteristics of the age. Those goals, typical of rational sociology at its mid-twentieth-century high-water mark, are left, quite rightly, to others. For those entering the humanities in higher education at a time of *profound* public troubles, the aim must be to answer the ‘call to responsibility’ (Latour, 2017, p. 31) *responsibly*. We must first come to know the Self—understanding the voices we have been given and the authority these embody. We must strive to identify those other voices—in ourselves and our partners—that have been silenced or marginalized and develop what Rizvi and Lingard (2010) call ‘competing imaginaries’ (p. 10) with which to express our common good. Ultimately, we must learn to live, and flourish, in a world of ‘entangled cosmologies’ (Latour, 2017, p. 27) where there are no simple paths to follow or solutions to offer. And always many futures.

Author biography

Stephen Carney is a Professor of Educational Studies at Roskilde University in Denmark where he led its Global Humanities program from 2014–2024. His research focuses on global educational reform and comparative method. He has studied university governance in Denmark, teacher preparation in England and Tibet, and school development in Nepal and India. He recently published a book, together with Ulla Madsen, exploring the remaining possibilities for education (*Education in radical uncertainty: transgressions in theory and method*). He was President of the Comparative Education Society in Europe (CESE) between 2016–2022.

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