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**A Review of *Inhuman Conditions: On Cosmopolitanism and Human Rights***

**Jessica Browne**

**Key words, terms, concepts, names:** Pheng Cheah, cosmopolitanism, cosmopolitan reason, human rights, inhuman conditions, globalization, technologization, global citizenship

**Introduction**

Pheng Cheah's book *Inhuman Conditions: On Cosmopolitanism and Human Rights* connects globalization and cosmopolitanism to the humanities in an effort to understand the nature of humanity itself. At its core, Cheah's arguments seem to relate to the quote from his book, "Humanity . . . is, after all, an interminable work of collaboration and comparison."<sup>[1]</sup> He makes his way through various stages of discourse. First, he presents the concept of new cosmopolitanism as a departure from the cosmopolitanism of Immanuel Kant and Karl Marx. He positions new cosmopolitanism within an intellectual and philosophical paradigm relative to nationalism and cosmopolitanism as "vehicles of freedom."<sup>[2]</sup> Cheah then moves through an analysis of Jurgen Habermas's writings on cosmopolitan democracy. He discusses the presence of hybrid cosmopolitanism as well. Primarily, though, he seeks to present new cosmopolitanism, its limitations, and its relationship to modern global capitalism, labor, and human conditions, or rather inhuman conditions.

**Thesis**

Cheah argues that inhuman conditions arise as a result of a transformation of a change in our understanding of humanity, which occurs as an effect of global capitalism and human "technologization."<sup>[3]</sup> This thesis derives from two correlated discourses. *Inhuman Conditions* is divided into two parts. The first section is called "Critique of Cosmopolitan Reason," and in it the reader finds a commentary on new cosmopolitanism as well as a criticism of new cosmopolitanism as it relates to the old cosmopolitanism of Kant and Marx. In the second part of his book, entitled "Human Rights and the Inhuman," Cheah presents the notion that human rights cannot be divorced from the conditions that characterize their context.<sup>[4]</sup> Through the dual discussions of new cosmopolitanism and the formation of humanity, the reader develops a sense of how inhuman conditions have arisen in the era of modern globalization.

**Critique of Cosmopolitan Reason**

In the first section of his argument, "Critique of Cosmopolitan Reason," Cheah outlines the claims of new cosmopolitanism, which acts as a foundation for his broader thesis. First, he says that globalization has "undermined many key functions from which the nation-state derives its legitimacy," therefore political agency should not apply merely to the nation-state itself.<sup>[5]</sup> As I have already mentioned, he connects globalization and cosmopolitanism to drive his argument. Interestingly, he notes that one result of globalization is an intricate network of transnational nongovernmental organizations and political institutions. This is the materialization of the link between globalization and cosmopolitanism, and it is significant to the discussion of the role of globalization in the construction, or deconstruction, of humanity. The main feature of cosmopolitanism,

J. Browne

according to Cheah, is that it represents an interest in humanity and democracy without regard to nationalism or territorial borders. True global citizenship, however, may in fact be an impossible end for which the appropriate means do not exist. Later in the book Cheah discusses the reflexive relationship that humans have with their contexts; namely, they both make it and are made by it. In a similar way, new cosmopolitanism has a reflexive relationship with global institutions. The author proposes that there is a relationship of mutual feedback between new cosmopolitanism and transnational institutions. It is sustained by these institutions while at once influencing them. This is a more global example of the reflexive relationship that Cheah says humans have with their contexts.

### Criticism

Pheng Cheah does not accept new cosmopolitanism's unwillingness to address its roots in the philosophical notions of the old cosmopolitanism of Kant and Marx. According to Cheah, "What Kant calls 'a universal cosmopolitan existence' is nothing less than the regulative idea of 'a perfect civil union of mankind.'" [6] To deliver the point more clearly, he goes on to say Kant's cosmopolitanism signifies a turning point where moral politics or political morality needs to be formulated beyond the polis or state-form, the point at which 'the political' becomes, by moral necessity, 'cosmopolitical.' What is striking is that Kant's cosmopolitanism is not identical to 'internationalism,' and its antonym is not 'nationalism' but 'statism.' [7] Cheah notes, not critically, that Kant's cosmopolitanism does not take into account "the role of nationalism in the transition between the age of absolutism and the age of liberalism," because his cosmopolitanism is formulated prior to the prominence of this nationalism. [8] For Marx, meanwhile, cosmopolitanism "is an existing and necessary condition resulting from the development of forces of production on a global scale. [9] In contrast to Kant's prenatalist cosmopolitanism, Marx's was characterized by anti-nationalism. Cheah favors a more progressive nationalism to ally itself with new cosmopolitanism. [10]

### Human Rights and the Inhuman

Cheah applies his understandings of globalization and new cosmopolitanism to human rights through his discourse on the construction of humanity. I already mentioned his argument that humans both shape and are shaped by their contexts. Human rights also cannot be divorced from the conditions that characterize their contexts. [11] Since capitalist globalization is the context for humans in the modern world, capitalist globalization is also the context for human rights. [12] Pheng Cheah then refers to human rights as "violent gifts" generated through a complex system of transnational institutional practices. He argues what is at issue here is precisely the crafting of the human, how humanity and all its capacities are not primary, original, and self-originating, but product-effects generated by forces that precede and exceed the anthropos. These forces are the inhuman conditions of humanity. [13]

He admits to the difficulty in seeing the ability of the humanities to contribute to the understanding of globalization because of the definitive political and technological qualities of political formations and transnational institutions. He moves beyond this with a twofold argument regarding the connection of the humanities to globalization. First, he refers back to Immanuel Kant as he outlines Kant's attribution of the ability to feel sympathy and engage inhuman communication to the humanities. [14] According to Cheah, conversations about globalization almost always include the notions of freedom and dignity, which are included in humanity-based discourse. At its root, *Inhuman Conditions: On Cosmopolitanism and Human Rights* is a dialogue on how the "human" is derived from the humanities yet shaped and affected by globalization and cosmopolitanism. He seeks to ask whether globalization makes us rethink what it means to be human. [15] He answers this question with a discourse on how cosmopolitanism and human rights are "two primary ways of figuring out the global as human." [16] In this section of the book, he focused on human rights abuses outside of the North Atlantic to highlight how globalization has contributed to the de-humanization of people because, while humanity in these areas "is not necessarily in crisis," it is easy to see how globalization processes have played into this. [17]

### Further Discussion

Cheah presents two "theoretical prisms," as he calls them, regarding the international division of labor. He emphasizes the North-South divergence, particularly drawing focus on the "postindustrial North, hyper-developing capitalist East Asia, industrializing India and Latin America, and low-growth Africa and the Arab and Islamic world." [18] The theoretical prisms he discusses revolve around the technologization of humans into less than people. A technical approach toward human labor means the reduction of people to mere instruments. Kant referred to this phenomenon as a "technical predisposition for manipulating things." [19] This technologization of humans is called *techne*, and it's "counterintuitive to achievement of freedom" because of its effect of reducing humans to technical instruments. Cheah continues to discuss moral law in the context of the technologization of humans, saying the ultimate result is the use of humans as means rather than ends. This means that humans are merely mechanisms in the global system of transnational institutions and multinational corporations, and human conditions do not necessarily represent a significant concern for many of these institutions and corporations. In the end, though, Cheah asserts "humans are persons and not things by virtue of their ontological constitution as rational and free beings." [20] Humans, as sentient beings capable of rational thought, are inherently possessing of inviolable rights because they are free and have dignity. [21] Fundamentally, human rights regimes and organizations seek to reverse this technologization and stop humans from being treated as instruments. There exists an interested catch-22, however, between human instrumentality and the technologization of labor. Cheah says Although human rights are supposed to regulate and humanize the field of instrumentality, they are themselves dependent on the political *techne* of states for their enforcement and realization. [22] What we discover from Cheah's text is that there are no simplistic answers to the challenges presented from globalization for the construction of international human rights. The only certainty is that inhuman conditions have so far characterized many global institutions and multinational corporations.

### Inhuman Conditions and Globalization

The broader implications of Pheng Cheah's book are easy to correlate to globalization. The issue of human rights in the context of capitalist globalization is significant. The author particularly points out this connection as it is illustrated in examples of real-world inhuman conditions. He points to the instances of indigenous peoples losing ancestral lands and the access to resources that lie within them. He claims that while globalization and human rights are closely related, it becomes challenging for indigenous people to not get caught up in the "global machine." [23] While human rights, particularly the de-technologization of humans, may characterize many aspects of globalization, globalization also produces disenfranchised people who unwillingly rely on it, producing a cycle that is nearly impossible to break out of. In her book *Altered States: The Globalization of Accountability*, Valerie Sperling points out that "... the people who are able to punish companies (e.g. consumers in rich countries) are frequently not the same people whose interests the codes are supposed to protect (e.g. workers and communities in developing countries)". [24] The phenomenon to which Sperling points is correlated to the disenfranchisement that characterizes the inhuman conditions of the world. Globalization, human rights, and the construction of the "human" are all closely related. The unwilling entanglement of laborers in the cycle of disenfranchisement is perhaps the most significant negative impact of globalization for human rights. Pheng Cheah points to the North-South divergence as well, in his contribution to the understanding of globalizations. He says that in the global South, nationalism and the nation-state may have more means to right economic wrongs, redistribute economic and social goods, and prevent the cycle of disenfranchisement. [25] While the global North may benefit from cosmopolitanism, the global South may find a significant amount of effectiveness in the means of nationalism and loyalty to the nation-state. The author places value on nationalism and the nation-state insofar as they may serve as effective means for righting economic wrongs, redistributing economic and social goods, and preventing the disenfranchisement cycle. He particularly makes reference to this in his discussion of the global North-South divide.

### Concluding Remarks

In another work by Pheng Cheah called *Grounds of Comparison*, Cheah describes globalization as a process that affects "all aspects of human existence." [26] *Inhuman Conditions: On Cosmopolitanism and Human Rights*, Cheah expands upon the reaches of globalization, the effects of cosmopolitanism, and the effect of each on development

J. Browne

of the global human condition. The humanities are inextricable linked to the study of globalization in Cheah's argument, as the humanities include the notions of freedom and dignity, which In *Cosmopolitanism and Global Citizenship*, Bhikhu Parekh argues that there exists an inherent human responsibility for the well being of fellow citizens and those outside of our own immediate community.[27] Interestingly, the author also says " . . . these obligations can conflict and since neither automatically trumps the other," which implies, as Pheng Cheah did, that cosmopolitanism and global citizenship is far from a simple, clear-cut set of ethical principles, but rather a challenging system of dueling nationalism loyalty and commitment to transnational institutions.

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J. Browne

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