

*Transnational Cosmopolitanism: Kant, Du Bois, and Justice as a Political Craft*  
Inés Valdez  
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W.E.B. Du Bois's contribution to the social contract tradition remains a neglected topic in contemporary political theory. In *Transnational Cosmopolitanism*, Inés Valdez has accomplished a notable feat. Valdez centers Du Bois's challenge to Kant and cosmopolitan theories of global justice. She pursues this neglected line of inquiry with the aid of Du Bois's post-World War I writings on colonialism, global economic inequality, and peace. To wit, she asserts that Du Bois's mature political theory endorses the idea of transnational cosmopolitanism, which reimagines global politics from the standpoint of colonized and oppressed persons. She positions Du Bois's thought not merely as a helpful tool for refining the Kantian framework, but as a formidable alternative supplanting it.

The book aims, first, to establish that the "transnational" arena is a distinct and self-standing public sphere, as captured by Du Bois's original theory of global justice, and, second, that the historical Kant and contemporary Kantian scholarship are unhelpful for overthrowing a white supremacist global order. Valdez argues that Du Bois defends a transnational form of political solidarity, through which racially oppressed and colonized peoples contest their exclusion from the domestic and international public spheres. In colonial times, excluded groups forged "horizontal coalitions of subjects at the receiving end of imperial powers" in a transnational public sphere that belonged neither to the domestic nor the international arenas, but challenged both arenas at once (2, 157). A transnational global political alliance, such as Du

Bois's direction of the Pan-African Congresses in the twentieth century, enabled victims of the Jim Crow U.S. and colonized persons in Africa and Asia to stand together to resist repressive European federations and their unjust domestic polities.

The book offers an original methodology. Rather than focus on textual exegesis, in chapter 1, Valdez offers a "creative and disloyal" reading of Kant to address the problems of (a) hierarchy and (b) correspondence (59). With respect to (a), Valdez argues that despite his rejection of slavery and colonialism by the mid-1790s, Kant's mature political thought is consistent with his racially inegalitarian account of progress, which positions non-white, non-Europeans as under-developed political agents. Chapter 1 provides an extremely detailed survey of the historical context of Kant's "Idea for a Universal History" and *Perpetual Peace* to demonstrate that these works aim to mitigate intra-European conflict in the colonies to secure peace and prosperity for Europeans (53). Valdez thus holds that Kant views intra-European colonial war as the primary obstacle to progress.

With respect to (b), the "problem of correspondence" assumes that theorists write theories to solve the problems that they (mistakenly) believe to be pressing. Because Kant aims to advance European prosperity and peace, Valdez submits that "there is a lack of correspondence" between the problems that Kant hopes to solve (to wit: how to advance European prosperity and peace in the light of the threat of intra-European conflict) and the problem that political theorists should strive to solve (to wit: how to overcome "the deep inequalities between the West and the non-West [at] the domestic and international levels" (12-13)). Chapter 2 argues that contemporary Kantian theories of justice have inadvertently inherited Kant's Eurocentric shortsightedness in their continued oversight of transnational political spaces of contestation, non-Western intellectual resources and practices, and non-Western public

institutions that champion cosmopolitan ideals (57-58). These approaches often assume that Western democracies are global exemplars of the cosmopolitan condition, but ignore that transnational political actions are necessary to disrupt a white supremacist global order.

In chapter 3, Valdez appeals to Du Bois's transnational cosmopolitanism to "transfigure" Kant's principle of hospitality for our nonideal world (88). On her view, Du Bois's transnational cosmopolitanism does not aim to realize the principles of Kant's domestic or global theory of justice, nor to counter systematic exclusion with the ideal of inclusion in domestic and international arenas. On the one hand, she asserts that Kant's political principles are ineffective for securing global justice and require revision, if not abandonment (55). On the other hand, she argues that transnational cosmopolitanism is a richer theory of global justice, one that is shaped by the first-hand experience of colonial oppression and foregoes "ultimate" ideals altogether: "the normativity of my account *does not depend on a vision of justice as an ultimate ideal*, but first on a construction of a composite picture of injustice based on the experience and political action of oppressed actors and, second, on the recovery of the aspirations towards justice contained in the struggle" (10). Thus, on her reading of Du Bois, not only are defenses of "ultimate" principles and ideals inadequate, but they are unnecessary. Thus her "transfiguration" of Kant's principle of hospitality should not be understood in terms of its application to a nonideal world, yet it is too strong to say that she calls for its abandonment, since Du Bois endorses hospitality as part of his cosmopolitanism.

The strongest chapters in the book, in my estimation, are 4 and 5. These chapters provide an account of Du Bois's transnational *politics*. Namely, chapter 4 maps the shape of the political consciousness of racially oppressed and colonized groups, as well as their motivation for enacting public joint commitments in a Pan-African movement in the twentieth century. For Du

Bois, the moral imagination of non-white, non-European actors holds the promise of a just cosmopolitan future (118-119). Chapter 5 provides an elegant formulation of “the structural transformation of the transnational public sphere” (161). A grassroots political mobilization establishes an anti-colonial counter-public through the “circulation of discourse,” which constructs a collective moral subject with distinctive practical ends (156-57).

This original and groundbreaking book will become essential in future scholarship on the Du Bois/Kant connection. In opening a new line of research, it accomplishes much, though it also leaves unanswered some important questions. Allow me to raise a few here. Consider that the distinction between domestic and international justice on the one hand, and transnational cosmopolitanism, on the other, is central to Valdez’s analysis, though it is sometimes difficult to track. She rejects that the transnational counter-public should be oriented towards reforming established domestic or international arenas. Instead, transnational solidarity supports disenfranchised groups’ political contestation without actualizing an ideal of inclusion within existing political communities (19). However, she acknowledges that transnational politics is an especially helpful tool of reform for Du Bois, citing his appeal to the United Nations in 1947 to pressure the U.S. to abandon *de jure* racial segregation (88). She also minimizes that Du Bois views states as essential public institutions through which an ideal of justice must be realized. (Or so I argue in my work (Basevich 2019)). A more systematic account of the overlap between domestic justice and transnational cosmopolitanism would be helpful.

Additionally, I am not clear why Valdez believes that Du Bois’s theory of global (and domestic) justice neither rests on nor establishes ultimate ideals. After all, Kant’s *principles* of domestic and cosmopolitan right appear to complement, if not overlap, Du Bois’s advocacy of equal rights, global peace, and economic equality. Yet Valdez is “agnostic” about the “shape of

institutions that will constitute cosmopolitan arrangements,” but I fear that such agnosticism obscures the positive ideals of Du Bois’s theory of global justice beyond an emphasis on defiant opposition to the domestic and international order (84). Valdez posits that political actors participate in a historically-developing deliberative procedure to democratically construct practical ends in the light of their shared experiences of oppression. This position suggests that a deliberative democratic procedure can ground and advance political action in response to shifting power structures. I am keen for more detail about the structure of such a deliberative democratic procedure and why its resultant practical ends can be said to advance an emancipatory politics. There is much in Du Bois to guide our thinking about the structure and historical development of democratic reason, especially in connection to his defense of the method of excluded groups in *Darkwater*, which Valdez does not discuss. Finally, though it is well beyond the scope of the book, on my view, it is worth establishing at the level of *ultimate ideals* whether Du Bois’s cosmopolitanism relies on a republican theory of the state, a popular recent trend for interpreting Africana philosophy (Gooding-Williams 2009; Rogers 2020), or endorses the idea of a world federation of peaceful states regulated by international public laws.

Valdez’s new book positions Du Bois to showcase Kant’s limits and provide an alternative to contemporary Kantian theories of global justice. Her singular accomplishment is to capture the power of historically excluded groups to imagine and forge a new path forward. I hope we have the courage to follow her lead, while also engaging in earnest debates about the nature of justice and how we get there.

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## References

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