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Bayat, A.

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Everyday Cosmopolitanism

It might sound out of place to speak of, let alone, invoke the idea of cosmopolitanism in the current global conditions that are dominated by the language of "clash"—clash of cultures, civilizations, religions, or ethnicities. The discourse of clash is currently so overwhelming as though it were the central feature of our international, religious, and communal life. The media apart, academia is also inclined to concentrate far more on human "conflict" as a subject of scholarly inquiry than on "cooperation" and "sharing." Precisely because of this prevalent preoccupation with clash, it becomes morally imperative to understand the other, more common but unnoticed and inaudible processes of human conduct, to show how people belonging to different cultural groupings can transcend their immediate selves by intensely interacting in their life-worlds with members of other ethnic or religious collectives. Would we still imagine today's Iraq as the "natural" embodiment of sharp ethnic and religious boundaries (because the 'nation' was no more than an artificial and imposed construct), if only we knew how the twentieth century Iraq was replete with instances of individuals, families, and neighbourhoods from Sunni, Shi'ii, Jewish, and Christian communities engaged in interactions and shared lives (see pp. 6-7)?

The recent upsurge in the literature on cosmopolitanism (even though highly diverse) points to welcome efforts to rectify the discourse of confrontation and mistrust, by resurrecting the ideal of living together. But how do we perceive "cosmopolitanism"?

Cosmopolitanism refers to both social conditions and an ethical project. In the first place, it signifies certain objective processes, such as globalization and international migration, that compel people of diverse communal, national, or racial affiliations to associate, work, and live together. These processes lead to diminishing cultural homogeneity in favour of diversity, variety, and plurality of cultures, religions, and lifestyles. In this sense Dubai, for instance, represents a cosmopolitan city-state in the sense that it juxtaposes individuals and families of diverse national, cultural, and racial belongings, who work and live next to one another within a small geographical space. Indeed modern urbani-ty per se can potentially contribute to cosmopolitan habitus by facilitating geographies of coexistence between the members of different religious or ethnic groups. But this may be so not just because people of different religions and cultures naturally come to live and interact with each other; after all neighbours might dislike and distrust one another. Rather because proximity and interaction can supply opportunities for divergent parties to experience trust (as well as mistrust) between them.

Cosmopolitanism has also ethical and normative dimensions; it is a project, something to be cherished. In this sense, cosmopolitanism is deployed to challenge the language of separation and antagonism, to confront cultural superiority and ethnocentrism. It further stands opposed to communalism, where the inward-looking and close-knit ethnic or religious collectives espouse narrow, exclusive, and selfish interests. Cosmopolitanism of this sort also overrides the "multiculturalist" paradigm. Because although multiculturalism calls for equal co-existence of different cultures within a national society, it is still preoccupied with cultural boundaries—an outlook that departs from cosmopolitan life-world where intense interaction, mixing, and sharing tend to blur communal boundaries, generating hybrid and "impure" cultural practices. The initiative of the Palestinian-Italian music group, Radiodervish (see pp. 12-13) to create multilingual songs where lyrics range from Italian, Arabic, to English and French, amplifies such a cosmopolitan project of crossing cultural and linguistic boundaries.

But is this lifestyle not the prerogative of the elites as the critiques often claim? Certainly elites are in a better material position to experi-