THE ROLE OF GLOBAL CITIZENS IN TODAY'S WORLD

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Abstract: There are a lot of things that one can feel positive about in regard to how far we have come ethically as a global society. However, we are still plagued by the existence of many social issues that pierce the veil of our wellbeing. Poverty, hunger, inequality and political instability, being but a few. This requires us to work towards appreciating the role that we can play to improve this reality for ourselves, and our global community. This article highlights the necessity of conceptualising our global society in communal terms that bind us to our global counterparts, and invokes us into action to address the causes of social injustice, locally and globally. It makes the case for appealing to the common humanity that we all share in regard to approaching some of the world's most pressing issues. The piece also emphasises the importance of the 'system of self' in regard to amending the wider, societal systems that may facilitate a lot of the aforementioned social challenges. Lastly, it addresses the importance of challenging ideologies of illiberalism in the overall attempt to enhance society, particularly in the context of regressive elements that are willing to add the vulnerable to their ranks.

Key words: Global Citizenship; Activism; Social Change; Common Humanity; Equality.

Introduction

'You're living at... a time of revolution, a time when there's got to be a change. People in power have misused it, and now there has to be a change and a better world has to be built' (cited in Ambar, 2012: 36). This is a quote from a speech delivered by human rights activist Malcolm X during an Oxford Union debate in 1964. Today, I would contend, the urgency and desire in his words still resonate with great precision, but in a way that is distinct to ways of old. In recent years, the concept of social justice has suddenly crept into popular culture, and in natural tandem with this phenomenon, there has been an increase in concern for issues pertaining to inequality and the mistreatment of humans across the globe. Testament to this are the mass protests that have

occurred in recent years, which have openly repudiated social wrongs and promoted the virtuous assignment of ensuring the wellbeing of humans throughout the world- and the wellbeing of the globe itself.

This spirit of protest is, of course, not unique to contemporary times. Lest we forget the great public demonstrations that have spanned the lineage of human history which have produced ground-breaking societal developments. However, what sets today's moral climate apart is the widespread, cultural adherence to ideals of fairness and equality; this adherence, is closer to being the norm, than an anomaly. It is now generally seen as desirable to be committed to - or for better or worse, to look like you are committed to - carrying society forward in the voyage towards unflinching justice. This cultural reality can greatly be attributed to the incremental, painstaking development of the collective, human conscience throughout history. As Dr Martin Luther King Jr put it, the 'arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice' (Knight, 2021: 15). I solemnly believe it can also be attributed to the impetus that is found in the activism of many of today's young people. This impetus has enabled a significant number of today's youth, and wider society, to recognise their role as global citizens, and play their part in positively bringing the global village forward, ethically.

I vividly remember moments in my upbringing as a black immigrant in Ireland where my mother, and many other members within the African community, would provide me with stark warnings of how racism will try to greatly shape how I navigate my life in Ireland, and how I had to tirelessly work to resist it in the pursuit of my goals. To add to this matter, I was born to a Pan-Africanist mother who was adept with the history of racism and colonialism that had scourged her motherland, and with love and grace - but also a very sceptical eye - cautiously observed her surroundings as an immigrant within Ireland to ensure her son's experiences were as free from bigotry as they could be. Upon becoming fully integrated into Irish society, which I know proudly call my own, both my mother and I have observed a change in cultural attitudes towards the issue of racism and bigotry amongst Ireland's citizens, particularly Irish, young people. There seems to be a greater

sense of intolerance towards racism in the ether, and at best, more people feel the need to actionably confront it. Needless to say, there is still some way to go, but promising developments have been made up to this point and this certainly provides hope for the future.

I am the Politics Coordinator of Black and Irish; an organisation that aims to build an inclusive, equal Ireland and promote the integration of the Black and Mixed-Race community into wider, Irish society. Through my role at Black and Irish, and my experiences more broadly as a youth activist, I have had the opportunity to see young people of all backgrounds work to combat racial discrimination in a way that would have been considered unimaginable for my mother and her migrant peers when she first arrived in Ireland. This speaks to an admirable fervour amongst many young people to visualise themselves as global citizens and to act accordingly. This fervour, however, is not limited to youth, as there are many other progressive-thinking people, of all ages, who share it in today's age. The task for these people is to extrapolate the burning passion they feel for fairness and equality across our communities, and the global society at large.

The nature of global citizenship

Within the nucleus of recognising one's role as a global citizen, is the realisation of our deep, symbiotic connection with all humans within the global family. This is an epiphany that sees us viewing the problems of our neighbours, as problems of our own. The wars ravaging nations, which are cutting life short before it has the chance to blossom, are not only wars within those nations but wars within the human house that we must all attempt to quench. Poverty mercilessly keeps a significant number of the fruits within the basket of existence from many of our global counterparts, and impedes upon the buoyancy of our own existence. Racism is a social ailment that strips societal groups of their dignity and blindly downplays the value that they possess. As the former Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius once stated in regard to this human connection, 'we are made for cooperation, like feet, like hands, like eyelids, like the rows of the upper and lower teeth' (Aurelius, 2020: 15). We, as human beings, are truly bound to one another, and the job of the

global citizen is to recognise this, find their place in today's world, and see where they can use their unique abilities to improve it for those who are less fortunate.

The issues that plague our civilisation such as hunger, disease and political instability, present a bitter-sweet panorama for the archetypal global citizen. On the one hand, there is a barely tolerable bitterness because of the fact that earnestly confronting the demoralising social challenges which a considerable amount of the world's population faces is very difficult to process and digest mentally. 'Change' is the mantra of the global citizen, and is uttered in activist corners so frequently that it has in itself become an emblem. However, acknowledging a bulk of the major issues that the world confronts at once, can lead to exhaustion and deceptively tempt us into dwarfing our capacity to 'change', which can result in melancholy and at times, self-defeating nihilism. Conversely, within this same context, there is also a mouth-watering sweetness. The sweetness rests in the great opportunity that the world places at our feet to actionably challenge social issues, and contribute to the advancement of our communal surroundings. There is no golden bullet when it comes to solving these issues. Within the issues - and their solution - is a complex web of political, economic, anthropological and various other factors. What is most important, is fully enabling the ethos of our common humanity to shine through when thinking of societal problems and allowing it to act as a bedrock, upon which we play whatever part we can in improving our worldly community.

The power within the 'system of self'

Although it is important for us to continually work to progressively impact the social systems around us, it is necessary to note that an unmitigated, singular focus on the wider 'systems' can sometimes lead to mental fatigue, and a sense of defeatism. The young person who may want to live more sustainably might ask, 'what is the point when corporations continue to seamlessly emit environmentally eroding emissions into the ecosystem?' The potential vegan who believes in the ethics of preserving the life of animals might question the existence of veganism, as 'someone, somewhere is going to eat meat

anyway'. That person who might want to cease spending their money at a store which exploits those who compose its products, may wonder what impact their cessation will have, when all of their neighbours purchase from that store, completely unbothered. Although there is a deep truth embedded in these scenarios, we must never forget the deeper value that rests in the task of reforming the system of self.

Few, if any, human-made systems can truly outweigh the power of a network containing individuals who have been 'spiritually reformed'- in other words, people who work to reform themselves, and organise to take social action. For it is individuals who manufacture the systems, and those same individuals, with the conscience and moral vigour they develop from self-reformation, can amend those systems. This is proven by the extensive voyage of the 'moral arc', that Dr King referred to, throughout history. It has mercilessly journeyed right through the institution of slavery in many parts of the world, has crushed the wall of legalised discrimination and repression in its stride, and left behind remnants of its progression upon the contemporary ocean, which we all enjoy today such as a better standard of living relative to our historical compatriots, and a relatively freer, and a more fruitful society than any other time in history (Easterlin, 2000). These developments emerged through toil and struggle, which was led by 'spiritually reformed' individuals, who took action to reform the motif of the very systems that initially barred these developments. Hence, focusing on the more immediate task of improving ourselves incrementally and acting in accordance with the aspirations we have for our local community, and the global community, is the sufficient starting point in embracing our role as global citizens. It does not mean we forget the systemic challenges that are before us. Nor does it mean that we neglect whatever role we feel we have to play in addressing those systemic challenges. But trying to be the change we wish to see in the world is both accessible and powerful, no matter how big or small one feels their contribution is.

Solidarity and a shared humanity

The key element of being an effective global citizen is appreciating our place, and the place of others, in the interwoven yarn of kinship, that encompasses all people. It is done by seeing right through the superficial elements that distract us from our shared essence. This essence transcends the superficial, and resides in each and every one of us. Charles Darwin, the founding father of the theory of evolution by natural selection, famously stated in his landmark text *On the Origin of Species*, 'from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been and are being evolved' (Darwin, 1909: 429). Here, Darwin is referring to the simple beginnings of life on earth, and how the process of evolution developed various life forms which branch away from the same starting point. This wonderful quote allegorically points to the scientific articulation of the all-encompassing link we share with all humans, and life forms, on the planet.

This axiom, of us all being cut from the same cloth, challenges any attempt to fundamentally distinguish ourselves from those around us, and implicitly calls on us to extend our solidarity to others and do as much as we can to uplift those around us. Behaviour which alienates, ostracises or isolates groups of people is an undesirable deviation from the truth of our commonality. The Irish parliamentarian and activist, Daniel O'Connell, who was referred to as 'The Liberator' due to his contributions to the cause of Catholic Emancipation, spoke avidly against American slavery. O'Connell once said about visiting the United States, 'so long as it is tarnished by slavery, I will never pollute my foot by treading on its shores' (cited in Geoghegan, 2010: 9). O'Connell clearly understood that the oppression of any man or woman, was also an indirect manifestation of oppression against him and he continually acted to rectify the presence of oppression within the domestic shores of Ireland, as well as beyond. This is the philosophy of the global citizen, and the bar that we must constantly attempt to reach in our efforts to fulfil that philosophy.

Education as a means to kick-start global citizenship

The vital prescription that follows the philosophy of global citizenship is the advancement of education. The absorbing, immediate concerns that every day people regularly face, primarily as a result of the nature of our socio-political structure, can oftentimes distract us from the fact that we are living in a global village that we all have a stake in. As a result, a lack of knowledge on the bond that we share with our global compatriots, and of the role we can play to better our immediate and global surroundings is created - or maintained - and this can open doors to unhelpful ways of thinking. Regressive political populism feeds on the lack of awareness its victims have of their connection with those around them. This is exemplified by the anti-immigrant, racialised rhetoric that is oft laden in the political arena. It is not surprising that there is a correlation between this type of rhetoric and underprivileged areas where adequate education is not always a guarantee, and where the demands of our socio-political environment uniquely places added hardship upon people. (Mondon, 2017).

A possible remedy to this issue rests in reimagining how we facilitate education, with regard to our social and civic responsibilities. Formal education, for example, could offer insights on the common humanity we share with those around us, and the work we can do to impact members of our community in positive ways. This would enable us to transcend superficial differences among ourselves and lead to social cohesion and progressive social change. This is especially true in Ireland, particularly in the context of racial discrimination and migration, as Irish history is inundated by the tragic experience of colonial racism and periods of mass migration. Education based on this historical backdrop could emphatically highlight the rubric of brotherhood that encapsulates those within Ireland, those who aim to find a home in Ireland, and those beyond our shores. This is a hidden potential within the sphere of policy and education that has not yet been adequately explored, and I hope will be tapped into at some point in the near future.

Racism and white supremacy

There is somewhat of an introspective challenge that arises for the global citizen, which certainly needs addressing. When striving to better the society within which one resides, it is not unusual for some to see as enemies those who stand in the way of progressive activism. However, as difficult as it can be, it is important to place those who arise to promote regressive ideals that may not be on the side of social progress within the context of the common humanity that we all share. Dr Martin Luther King Jr regularly cited the bible to proclaim that 'we are all one in the eyes of God' and that the racism promoted by white supremacists was not a blemish of King's, or black America's, but a deep spiritual blemish within the white supremacist, as the white supremacist intellectually departs from the oneness that they and their black and minority ethnic brethren belong to (King Jr, 2010). This departure from the reality of our interconnectedness, creates vulnerability. The bigot who believes it is a strength to reside in their morally bankrupt ideological framework is actually fundamentally weak. In fact, they are victims. Victims of a poisonous wave that carries them from the reality of their own soul to a plastic, precarious place that is not durable enough to hold its own against the tide of reality.

One of the fundamental differences between those who have been allotted an unfortunate deck of cards by society, and those who promote an ideology that paradoxically denies the humanity of others, whilst trying to validate their own, is that the former are obviously vulnerable and deserve assistance, whilst the latter are also vulnerable, but do not realise that they are vulnerable. This means, that as far as is practicable, and where it is appropriate, it is important for the global citizen to also lend a hand to those who have been victimised by undesirable ideologies, and help them to kick-start their own spiritual reformation. This is certainly not possible in all scenarios, and impossible utopianism is destined to be crushed by the toughness of reality. But there are committed elements of illiberalism within society that would gladly recruit those who are vulnerable, therefore, the extension of the ideal of brotherhood should not fall short at reaching the

oblivious victim where possible, as this too inevitably leads to a positive change for the global community.

Conclusion

To be a global citizen, is to care. It is to empathise. It requires an honest acknowledgement of the complex mixture of privileges and disadvantages with which you personally juggle, and that which your neighbour juggles; and calls on you to see how you can work cohesively with your neighbour to offset the existing disadvantages and to establish more indicators of happiness, for yourself and everyone within the global neighbourhood. It involves an appreciation for the transcendental cloak of our common humanity that encapsulates all human beings. Partaking in the instrumental voyage of the 'moral arc' is never easy, and I certainly cannot lay claim to an indestructible obedience to the ways that I have advocated in this article. But we as humans have come an incredible distance as it is, so there is no reason, especially considering how far we have come, why we cannot strongly continue our voyage into a better future.

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