



BRILL

# Grounded Normative Theory and Intersectional Differences

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## Abstract

This article focuses on the promise of grounded normative theory in Luis Cabrera's *The Humble Cosmopolitan*. The article celebrates Cabrera's use of grounded normative theory as a way to center the lived experience of politically marginalized groups while also being attentive to the politics of knowledge production. My concern is not with the methodology itself; rather, it is with Cabrera's partial use of it. I ask, how might the analysis of the book change if the author considered different intellectual histories of citizenship rooted in feminist and critical approaches? How might the theoretical assumptions and justifications of the book change if the author challenged his own assumptions, especially as they relate to the epistemic authority of Dalit women?

## Keywords

grounded normative theory – intersectionality – gender – caste – lived experience – knowledge production

In *The Humble Cosmopolitan*, Luis Cabrera draws on the work of B.R. Ambedkar to develop a theory of cosmopolitan political humility. Informed by Ambedkar's scholarship and activism, Cabrera asks: can strong cosmopolitanism be oriented towards political humility rather than political arrogance? The book explores how an institutional global citizenship approach to cosmopolitanism could promote political humility globally. Cabrera employs a grounded normative theory method informed by extensive field research with Dalit (so-called “untouchable”) activists in India. Through his empirical research

he finds that an institutional global citizenship holds significant potential for advancing global rights protections.

Cabrera's *The Humble Cosmopolitan* centers Ambedkar as an intellectual and an activist. Cabrera asks: what can political theory learn from Ambedkar? He considers: how can Ambedkar's understanding of caste within Indian democracy help us understand the experience of political minorities within a sovereign states system and within global political institutions? Cabrera argues that Ambedkar's understanding of political humility can be the ethical foundation for a different kind of cosmopolitanism—a humble cosmopolitanism.

After explaining how and why Ambedkar's understanding of political humility—as social endosmosis, fraternity, and *maitri* [a Buddhist concept that refers to the expression of sympathy, amity, and benevolence toward others]—can create more democratic and cosmopolitan political institutions, Cabrera takes on the task of institutional design at the supra-state level. He asks, how we can design a kind of institutional global citizenship that “would be systematically oriented towards cosmopolitan political humility, and thus to advancing equitable rights...globally” (Cabrera, 2020, p. 199). To answer this question, Cabrera bridges empirical data with political theory. He contributes to a field of study called grounded normative theory that centers the lived experience of politically marginalized groups while recognizing their epistemological authority in the research process (Cabrera, 2010; Keating, 2011; Ackerly, 2018; Behl, 2019).

One of the major contributions of Cabrera's book is its powerful weaving together of theoretical and empirical analysis. The author engaged in a “strongly recursive” research endeavor that relied on “triangulation” across “normative political theory, the qualitative fieldwork, and the analysis of Ambedkar's central works” (Cabrera, 2020, p. 104). The qualitative fieldwork in India included 50 semi-structured, open-ended interviews with members of the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) and 24 interviews with Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) officials over a six-year period.

Even as Cabrera became an expert in Ambedkar's writings and politics, even as he became an expert in the current political movement for Dalit equality in India, he makes clear his outsider position. For example, in the Preface to *The Humble Cosmopolitan* the author acknowledges with humility his own blind spots. He states, “when I began this project, I had no idea who Ambedkar was” (Cabrera, 2020, p. xi). Cabrera explains that he “was familiar, like most...with the images of Mohandas K. Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Indira Gandhi,” but he did not know about Ambedkar until the “NCDHR staff members patiently offered an introduction to Babasaheb [an honorary title meaning ‘revered father figure’ widely used for Ambedkar]” (2020, p. xi).

Cabrera finds Ambedkar's and the NCDHR's work on equality and humility compelling and calls on political theory to listen and learn from Ambedkar and other Dalits in India. I follow Cabrera's call to listen to those who are most marginalized when developing theory—be it a theory of cosmopolitanism (Cabrera, 2020), theory of justice (Ackerly, 2018), theory of citizenship (Behl, 2019), theory of racial politics (Lee, 2018) or theory of democracy (Keating, 2011). I also follow Cabrera's call to use grounded normative theory to:

1. expand the set of claims to be considered,
2. expand the set of possible objections,
3. clarify the set of actors to be included,
4. correct empirical presumptions,
5. challenge the theorist's own presuppositions, and
6. highlight what is at stake (2020, p. 98).

And it is from these shared goals of trying to achieve “more-egalitarian, more-cosmopolitan political institutions” (Cabrera, 2020, p. 196) that I ask a series of questions of Cabrera's *The Humble Cosmopolitan*, questions that can perhaps further center the lived experience of those who are most marginalized within both our democratic and epistemic communities.

In Chapter Six of *The Humble Cosmopolitan*, Cabrera outlines the distinction between state and global citizenship in an effort to make sense of the NCDHR's actions “as ones of *institutionally developmental global citizenship*” (2020, p. 155). As I read this chapter, I kept wondering: How would the analysis change if the author acknowledged different intellectual histories of citizenship rooted in different epistemic communities? What possibilities might open up in our understandings of citizenship in India and globally? What I have in mind are feminist and critical scholars of citizenship, who often conceptualize citizenship as a normative ideal about equality and an analytic framework for determining inequality (Lister, 1997, 2007; Yuval-Davis, 1997; Glenn, 2002; Siim, 2013). Just as Ambedkar does, these scholars explain that citizenship is experienced unequally depending on intersecting forms of difference—caste, class, race, gender, religion, and sexuality. Perhaps this alternative intellectual history of citizenship is better suited to understand both Ambedkar's corpus and politics? Perhaps it is better suited to understanding the political claims of current Dalit activists?

Cabrera cites the words of a Dalit activist who identifies the tensions between India's constitution that guarantees equality for Dalits and the Dalit community's unequal lived experience: “In India, there are two types of constitutions. One is the written Constitution by Babasaheb [Ambedkar], and the other is the unwritten Constitution of caste forces—that is the Brahmin

constitution, guided by *Manusmriti* [laws of Manu]" (Cabrera, 2020, p. 107). I was hoping that the author would lean into the tension identified by the Dalit activist—the tension between the written constitution and the unwritten one. Perhaps a centering of alternative intellectual histories of citizenship would have enabled this. I keep wondering, what political possibilities would have been opened up if the author centered feminist and critical approaches to citizenship when considering the fiction of equality as outlined by both Ambedkar and the NCDHR activists.

In Chapter 5 of *The Humble Cosmopolitan*, it is clear that for the Dalit activists intersecting categories of difference matter. The interview participants themselves give voice to the differential impact of gender, especially as it relates to violence and sexual assault. Cabrera clearly outlines how the NCDHR activists respond to and organize against gendered violence (2020, pp. 114 & 124). However, after outlining how gender, caste, and violence intersect to create unequal citizenship for Dalits, he returns to the abstract language of majority groups and minority groups as if they are monolithic and homogenous, as if they are not differentiated by gender and other categories of difference.

Gender is often the overlooked category of analysis in both academic and popular understandings of the relationship between an Indian secular state and majority and minority communities. In India, women's bodies are often the site of struggle between the state and communities, yet women themselves are largely missing from these debates. The way these debates get framed matters because it has implications for how women's equality is understood (Mani, 1987; Sangari and Vaid, 1999; Kapur, 2002; Behl, 2017). Again, I wonder: How would *The Humble Cosmopolitan* change if it integrated feminist thinking in its analysis of the relationship between the Indian state and majority and minority groups (Sunder Rajan, 2003; Menon, 2004; Keating, 2011; Behl, 2019)? What if Dalit women's epistemic authority regarding their lived experience of unequal citizenship was privileged to inform the theoretical assumptions and justifications of the book? How would the centering of Dalit women's voices change the understanding of key concepts in the book, such as cosmopolitanism, citizenship, and democracy?

I raise these questions as a sympathetic reader who shares Cabrera's goal to create more democratic political institutions. I ask these questions as someone who sees value in grounded normative theory because it can center the lived experience of politically marginalized groups while being attentive to the politics of knowledge production. I ask these questions while celebrating Cabrera's centering of Ambedkar—of Babasaheb—alongside Dalit activists in political theory.

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