



The Cosmopolites: The Coming of the Global Citizen

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The cosmopolites are literally "citizens of the world," from the Greek word *kosmos*, meaning "world," and *polites*, or "citizen." Garry Davis, aka World Citizen No. 1, and creator of the World Passport, was a former Broadway actor and World War II bomber pilot who renounced his American citizenship in 1948 as a form of protest against nationalism, sovereign borders, and war. Today there are cosmopolites of all stripes, rich or poor, intentional or unwitting, from 1-percenters who own five passports thanks to tax-havens to the *Bidoon*, the stateless people of countries like the United Arab Emirates. Journalist Atossa Abrahamian, herself a cosmopolite, travels around the globe to meet the people who have come to embody an increasingly fluid, borderless world.

Along the way you are introduced to a colorful cast of characters, including passport-burning atheist hackers, the new Knights of Malta, California libertarian "seastealers," who are residents of floating city-states, *Bidoons*, who have been forced to be citizens of the island nation Comoros, entrepreneurs in the business of buying and selling passports, cosmopolites who live on a luxury cruise ship called *The World*, and shady businessmen with ties to Syrian dictator Bashar al Assad.

The Cosmopolites: The Coming of the Global Citizen Details

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James says

I thought this was OK but could have been fleshed out more -- it's more of a collection of excellent long-form articles than it is a coherent book. Some of this is probably familiar to many readers -- the part about the bidoon in the UAE and Kuwait, though, was entirely new to me and worth the price of admission. I knew that rich people and various idealists were mucking around with passports, but I had no idea that ultra-high net worth STATES were vacuuming up passports in order to solve problems of statelessness in their own borders without granting valuable citizenship. This is a useful meditation on what's happening in a world that is increasingly global and increasingly national at the same time, and she makes some great points: especially that capital can flow around the world with astonishing ease, and people want it, but stateless people often can't travel at all.

Nils says

Some are born citizens, some purchase citizenship, and some have citizenship thrust upon them: this, in a nutshell, provides the narrative arc to Abrahamian's wonderful little book. At its analytic core, this book is an account of the rise of the passport-sales industry, pioneered by various passport entrepreneurs, who have figured that this is a good revenue generation scheme for many impoverished island nations (she focuses on the Comoro Islands, a former French colony in the Indian Ocean, and St. Kitts and Nevis, a former British colony in the Caribbean), who often have very little else to sell. Essentially, these passport entrepreneurs arrive in these islands with a pitch for arbitraging one of the great remaining barriers within our globalizing world, namely the stolidity of citizenship, still something that the vast majority of people inherit as a birthright, much as titles are inherited by aristocrats. (Some of these citizenships are worth a great deal more than others, the Swiss being the best, and Afghan perhaps the least valuable -- measured both by the global mobility that the passport afford, as well as the social benefits the holder can claim from the state. As Sam Moyn and others have pointed out, citizenship in a particular state is the still the primary vehicle through which rights are claimed.) Many of these passport entrepreneurs combine hucksterism with ideological passion, either of a libertarian sort (claiming they are undoing arbitrary and repressive government regulations) or a humanitarian sort (claiming they are solving the problem of statelessness). Both types also claimed that, by providing a new income stream to these poor islands, they were kick-starting a development process that, in the case of the Comoros, involved imagining these islands as a future "Arab Hawaii."

Part of what is most interesting about Abrahamian's account is the varied "customers" for these passports-for-sale. On the one hand, the primary customers consist of the most privileged people on the planet, who prefer to have multiple passports, since each one comes with a particular mix of privileges -- these are the primary customers that the libertarian hucksters see themselves as serving. In this phase of the story, we seem to have a classic story about globalization eroding national sovereignties, with these passport entrepreneurs promoting themselves as avatars of modernization and global cosmopolitanism, against the atavistic mono-citizenship regimes inherited from the 20th century. Abrahamian asks some difficult questions here, about the relationship between the rights that come with citizenship and the duties that may also attend with the same, mainly to criticize the deeply unequal nature of different sorts of citizenship, as well as the absurdity of having basic political rights becoming a tradable commodity. Citizenship, far from being a universal category that provides the basis for universal human rights, turns out to be as varied in its qualities as the states that supply them. What's clear, however, is that having more passports means you have more rights, and so for many globe-trotting elites, having multiple passports represents both a convenience

and a political insurance policy in case things get dicey for them in a particular locale. A foreign passport can serve as a literal get-out-of-jail-free card.

But the other category of "consumers" for these commercial passports is even more intriguing, namely the stateless, for whom the possibility of a being able to purchase a passport, and thus finally gain access to the "the right to have rights" (as Arendt put it) might seem like an unmitigated blessing. Here, however, is where Abrahamian's story turns particularly interesting, and dark. It turns out that in the case of the Comoran passports, some of the biggest customers turn out to have been the Kuwaiti and Emirati governments, which were interested in purchasing thousands of Comoran passports in order to give them to the "bidoon." The bidoon are Gulf-born residents who for various reasons -- often because their forebears had been immigrants from elsewhere -- did not claim or receive citizenship status when the opportunity arose in the postwar period. The statelessness of the "bidoon" have been a political embarrassment for years, one made worse by the progressive "hardening" of the Gulf states' definitions of citizenship in the wake of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, which was prompted in part by a desire to re-write the kinds of state and citizenship lines that the Brits and French bequeathed to the middle east as part of the postcolonial succession. In the rising commercialized passport industry, these governments saw a brilliant solution to their dilemma of what to do about these people who their legal machinations had rendered stateless: by giving them a Comoran passport, these lifelong residents of the Gulf states could now be declared visa-less foreigners, and deported.

Needless to say, this wasn't what most of the bidoon wanted themselves; what they wanted was Emirati or Kuwaiti citizenship, since these passports are far more "valuable" (For example, Kuwaiti citizens get \$55K/year in direct cash transfers from their government) than those associated with some remote and impoverished Indian Ocean archipelago. Thus the great irony: the process of expanding citizenship to the undocumented, worked in practice to violate their subjective desires, while the Gulf States attempted to deploy the language of human (e.g. political) rights as a way to deflect (economic, social, and spatial) claims-making. Thus are the ironies of the liberal global human rights regime in an age where everything, even citizenship, becomes a commodity.

Dee says

Interesting enough, and would have been great when I was 18 and considering a career in international journalism (pre-"War on Terror"). This felt like an amalgamated bunch of true-life storytelling essays (early-career) longform journalism with actual analysis and critique of capitalism/ privilege/ xenophobia/ globalism shoehorned into the afterword.

Benjamin says

Fascinating stuff. I wish it had expanded a little bit more to discuss global immigration trends or trends with regard to visas and passports. Nonetheless it goes into some really detailed discussions on specific issues (for example, the purchasing of Comorosian citizenship by the Kuwait government so that they could get rid of their stateless people; or, the passport industry of St. Kitts and Nevis, which now makes up around 25% of their entire GDP). Would recommend.

Bastian Greshake Tzovaras says

This is a marvelous book! I knew virtually nothing about how citizenships are sold nowadays, by the rich who want more "useful" passports, either for international travel or to avoid taxes (e.g. did you know that one of Facebook's co-founders renounced his US-citizenship in order to avoid taxes?) as well as by the poor. Kuwait, the Emirates etc. are trying to "get rid" of their stateless population by deporting them with freshly bought passports.

Definitely gets you to think about the concept of a nation and borders, 2500 years after the first cynics and stoics hated the idea and thought of themselves as being cosmopolites.

Leif says

Why are so many families whose lives have been spent wholly in the UAE—as well as their parents' lives, and theirs before them—suddenly Comorian citizens? Why are the wealthiest of businessmen (note the gender) passport-carrying "citizens" of an incredible number of countries, from St. Kitts to Switzerland to Malta and on? Most trenchantly, what is happening here when citizenship is bought, sold, or traded on obscure markets?

Nothing good. Part of our current phase of global capital: your ability to reside as a political citizen is contingent on economic activity. Abrahamian traces the incipient beginnings of this change with care; the warnings are on the wall. Get rich or you may have no home to go home to; read this book, if only to better understand the contemporary plight of the *bidoon*.

David says

The Comoro Islands story reads like something that Jimmy Breslin would have uncovered years ago - behavior that's equal parts cynical, believable, and telling.

Isabella Kevorkian says

Clumsily written; the author was far too indecisive about the tone and characterization.

Ruxi says

This book was enthralling. I could have read it in one sitting. The author maintained a humorous tone while dealing with heavy questions such as "What is the point of citizenship?" and "Who has the right to decide citizenship?" None of the things dealt with in the book can be reduced to black and white, but the author presented both sides of the issues- she wasn't biased.

mia moraru says

'wealthy and white, you're an expat; hard-working and from a third-world country, you're an immigrant; poor or black or on the brink of death, you're a migrant' --- 'the sale of citizenship...speaks to the arbitrariness of the concept of belonging to a nation to begin with'

Denis says

Citizenship as a commodity poses serious challenges to the assumptions that underlie so many of our international systems, and this book is a very insightful examination of the parallel developments of the global elite who buy additional passports for convenience in travel and taxation and the stateless populations of the gulf states who have other passports purchased for them by governments that don't want to extend the generous financial support of being a citizen of a wealthy petro-state. It is tightly written and compelling, especially as a window into the beauty and dysfunction of the little-known islands of Comoros.

Steven says

A very interesting concept, but the book focused on one story at the expense of many it could have mentioned. The intro, afterword, and a chapter in the middle about the technological changes pushing for national/sovereignty changes are the integral parts. The rest is mostly just in-depth about one story introduced in the beginning. To be fair, it's a very interesting story, but I was hoping for more breadth.

Joel says

This is essentially a long-form journalism piece that was turned into a book. Its premises are questionable and its conclusions are shallow. It does open a window into a weird phenomenon whereby Gulf nations buy citizenship for their immigrant workers with a third-party nation. This book is the polar opposite of Thomas Fleming's "The Morality of Everyday Life", probably due to the author's globalist background.

Miki Habryn says

There's a couple of interesting story arcs in this anthology of extra-citizenship, and a tolerable minimum of filler. There's more in the way of uncritical reporting than actual analysis, though-every mention of Bitcoin makes my teeth itch.

Mary Anne says

One of my colleagues recommended this book, though I can't recall how he or she used it or the subject matter of the class. I currently teach a writing class and am interested in using a theme of global engagement/citizenship, so this looks interesting. It's absolutely not what I was expecting.

I figured the book would be more about seeing beyond national borders to see ourselves as citizens of the entire world (thus making international concerns our own), and that was actually not far off in some ways. Abrahamian focuses on the issues of those people who are not legally or officially recognized as citizens of any country. I would argue that a significant part of the population in the US doesn't have to worry about that. I know I certainly didn't. But for people who were legally in a country until they suddenly weren't, life is close to a guessing game. The book also looks at countries who are not well off economically and how business people can take advantages by buying and selling citizenship. This is what happens when whole countries have agreements to honor the passports and citizenship of other countries. It's politically and economically convenient, and apparently it's also a pretty successful business. But countries that weren't well off to begin with still aren't well off. It's sort of like having the World Cup and Olympics in Brazil; police brutality, unemployment, political instability, and horrendous violations and rape of women aren't going away anytime soon.

I'm living in a time where my passport isn't a big deal. I mean, I can't just go live in Italy, but my passport will get me there and home, and I won't be arrested and moved to some other country that I've never known. And I don't think the possibility of a President Donald Trump will change that, necessarily. But man, we're talking a lot about borders these days, and it's worrisome that all it takes is a politician's signature that can so dramatically change the world.

There really is no closure to this issue (of course, it's still happening). But I think it really effectively brings up the concept of borders and how often we rely on them and on the ideals of nationalism. I also have to give to the author. Abrahamian does a fantastic job of relaying the information in an objective, clear, and powerful way. This isn't to say that she doesn't have a message, but she's letting the information speak for itself. I am absolutely using this book in my writing class, and I'm interested in reading more of the Columbian Global Reports. They're short, easy to read, and significant.
