Old baggage and missing luggage: a commentary on Beck and Sznaider’s ‘Unpacking cosmopolitanism for the social sciences: a research agenda’

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It was within the swirling political, economic, ideological and intellectual currents of the turn of the twenty-first century that ideas about cosmopolitanism once more began to be delineated and debated. This discussion came in the wake of vibrant literatures that described and theorized globalization and transnationalism. All these scholarships reflected on and reflected a series of transformations in the organization of capital accumulation that made processes of production and consumption more flexible and fluid (Harvey 1989). Both powerful globe-spanning organizations such as the World Bank and World Trade Organization and the political leadership of individual nation-states were significant actors in these processes. Nation-states did not fade away but they did reorganize their regulatory apparatuses. A number initiated dual citizenship policies for the first time, which enabled migrants to claim membership in two or more states simultaneously. Responding and contributing to global restructuring, new social movements developed espousing a range of issues including environmentalism, opposition to structural adjustment policies and the debt of third world nations, various forms of long distance nationalism and religious fundamentalisms.

In this historical conjuncture, the concepts of globalization, transnationalism and the related notion of disparic communities were embraced by various powerful institutions and major scholars in different formats and forums. At the same time potent critiques of globalization developed and these critiques contributed to the further development of social and political organizing against growing global inequality. Yet unlike globalization theory, cosmopolitanism has had less of a public presence, although there has been a
robust new scholarship on both the right and left. Why has there been this relative silence?

There are many reasons to note the historical context of the development and popularization of social theory (Gouldner 1970). Theory needs to reflect changes in the world and historical transformations influence how we understand the world around us – including what becomes suddenly visible and what becomes obscure. In addition, a critical historical perspective on theory development allows us to place theoretical ideas in relationship to old and newly emerging hegemonic ‘common sense’ and be critical of what is coming to seem apparent. Cosmopolitan theorization has been used by some proponents such as Mary Kaldor (2007: 133) to reconceptualize military interventions that have been marketed as international peacekeeping as ‘cosmopolitan law enforcement’. None the less, the term retains a vision of human solidarities beyond national loyalties and this aspect of cosmopolitanism has not sat well with mainstream social theory. At the same time, as conceptualized and developed by its most prolific scholar, Ulrich Beck, cosmopolitanism has had serious limitations that have restricted its use by those struggling to address the current historical moment and develop new theoretical and political perspectives.

In this commentary on the seminal article ‘Unpacking cosmopolitanism for the social sciences: a research agenda’, by Ulrich Beck and Natan Sznaider (2010 [2006]), I offer an assessment of the problematics of this contribution to the literature on cosmopolitanism. I examine briefly: (1) the significance of Beck and Sznaider’s insights about methodological nationalism, the politics of perspectives, and relationality; (2) the absence of an adequate theorization of power in their theoretical summary; (3) reasons why this approach to cosmopolitanism has not had the salience and popularity of concepts of globalization and transnationalism – which also have often been marked by silences around questions of power; (4) the possibilities of strengthening the theory through a further development of a subaltern cosmopolitanism.

In their article Beck and Sznaider assert that recent world transformations are best understood as a process of ‘cosmopolitanization’ and that ‘methodological cosmopolitanism’ will provide new horizons for social theory. In point of fact they ‘unpack’ four different aspects of the concept of cosmopolitanism by noting that it is simultaneously a description of the world, a basis of social theory, a research agenda, and a moral guide. Their article can be considered a classic in that it both captures and contributes to a particular moment and to contemporary developments in social theory. It is a sign of the volatility of the times, as well as being indicative of why cosmopolitanism has not become a mainstream literature, that although it was published in 2006 and is a summary of Beck’s prolific recent scholarship on the topic, this article seems simultaneously strangely dated, somewhat innocent, and refreshingly visionary.
Insightful yet . . .

Beck and Sznaider highlight the relationship between the development of theory and historical change and suggest that changes in the material world had finally allowed social scientists to begin to shed their methodological nationalism. It is certainly the case that although critiques of methodological nationalism – the taking for granted ‘that society is equated with national society’ – had been voiced in the previous decades, it was only at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and in relationship to the prominence and new intensity of global flows of capital, people, objects, and ideas, that the concept and the term became fashionable in academic circles.¹

Beck’s work on cosmopolitanism including, ‘Unpacking cosmopolitanism’, has been singularly useful because of his insistence that it is important to distinguish ‘cosmopolitanization’, a process of globe-spanning fundamental social change that is making new theoretical insights possible, and ‘methodological cosmopolitanism’. ‘Methodological cosmopolitanism’ is the reflexive theory-building process that allows scholars to shed methodological nationalism, think beyond the confines of national concerns, problematics, and perspectives and acknowledge the mutual constitution of the local and the global. In an important move in theory-building Beck and Sznaider use these distinctions to learn from post-structuralist, post-colonial, post-modern, and feminist critiques of the hegemony of European universality, yet retain an insistence that there is a real world which human subjectivity both reflects and transforms. This approach they call ‘cosmopolitan realism’. They call for empirical research on processes of cosmopolitanization and crucially raise the question of what unit of research and analysis can carry us beyond methodological nationalism towards a new research agenda. Furthermore, they distinguish between the analysis of these processes as a project in social theory and a normative politics of openness inspired by the historical moment.

However, at different points in their argument, various weaknesses of the turn-of-the-century theories, with their tendency to build on a postmodern rhetoric of the emergence of a brave new world, all seem to be synthesized in Beck and Sznaider’s approach to cosmopolitanism. As a result they contradict the general thrust of their argument and do so in ways that make it less attractive as a foundational perspective for new social theory. For example, on one hand, they assert that methodological nationalism has been a long-standing problem in social theory, rooted in Rousseau’s theorization of the nation and reflected in Durkheim’s concept of society. This position implies that there have long been multiple interconnections across space and politically bounded territories but the salience of concepts of the nation have kept us from theorizing these cosmopolitan connections. Yet, on the other hand, they fail to highlight previous post-enlightenment connectivities: an historical perspective is only fleetingly present in this article. Instead, at various points Beck and Sznaider adopt a
rhetoric basic to theories of modernization and postmodernism, which draws a sharp contrast between traditional and modern, past and present, a world of bounded nation-states and a contemporary age of globalization.

The few other cosmopolitan moments Beck and Sznaider highlight take us back to the ancient world and to Kant’s articulation of perpetual peace in 1795. Despite these references, they imply that it is only at the current moment that ‘the dualities of the global and the local, the national and the international, us and them have dissolved and merged together in new forms’ (2010 [2006]: 383 [3]). Similarly we are informed that ‘national organization as a structuring principle of societal and political action can no longer serve as the orienting reference point for the social scientific observer’ (see 2010 [2006]: 384 [4], emphasis in the original). One wonders whether national organization was ever an adequate perspective for social theory. Certainly, as post-colonial theorists have noted, ‘national organization’ as a reference point hindered the theorization of European nation-state building and gendered hierarchy as a process that intimately involved colonized territories and peoples (Said 1979; Hall and Rose 2006).

Anther important contribution made by the article is the concept of the ‘politics of perspectives’. This felicitous term reminds us that all theory is socially situated, reflecting not only the period and geo-political location of the theorist but also his or her multiple social positionings of class, gender, racialization, and sexual orientation. When coupled with Beck and Szaider’s stress on relationality, which allows us to place theorists and their subjects within networks of social relations rather than in bounded and essentialized categories, the article represents an important distillation of recent efforts to move beyond binary thinking (Deleuze 2001; Butler 2004). Moreover, Beck and Sznaider link transformations on a global scale with changes in the formation of individual subjectivities. Their approach to overcoming binary divisions between structure and agency moves beyond Anthony Gidden’s approach to structuration.

A new age of nationalism and subaltern cosmopolitanism in a globally precarious world

From my perspective, Beck and Sznaider’s clarion call for new social theory has had few echoes as compared to those who speak of globalization and transnationalism because of both the strengths and weaknesses of their formulations about cosmopolitanism. On the one hand, Beck and Sznaider offer not only a description of an emerging cosmopolitan reality in which mutual interdependence is becoming acknowledged, but also a normative social vision of a more harmonious and human world. To me this is a strength, but one that was not welcome in 2006 at a time when grand narratives that explained global change were being discredited as uniformly universalizing and hence disempowering. I should note that the recent economic crisis has changed the
terms of the debate to some extent. On the other hand, for those who might be desiring to build theory that can empower struggles for social justice, the absence of an adequate theory of power in Beck and Sznaider’s cosmopolitanism is a clear failing. Despite a passing mention of capitalism and neoliberalism in ‘Unpacking cosmopolitanism’, there is no analysis of the continuing immense power of corporations, and financial institutions and the imperial states that serve as their base areas.

It is important to note that Beck has written about power, if incompletely. A few years prior to the publication of ‘Unpacking cosmopolitanism’ Beck published his book, *Power in the Global Age: A New Global Political Economy* (2005 [2002]). The insights in this book about the continuing power of globe spanning capital, its relationship to the neo-liberal restructuring of the state, and the ability of states to espouse a cosmopolitan agenda and take despotic action are strangely missing or downplayed in the Beck and Sznaider article and in Beck’s other publications. The result is the denial of persistent centres of power within the intense connectivity out of which cosmopolitanism is being theorized. Thus we are told: ‘methodological nationalism is clearly at work in our conviction that [one] nation is the influence and [the other] is the influenced.’ Among other problems, this statement fails to separate out political, economic, and cultural influences. While cultural production does indeed and has for a long time gone in many directions, the power of states that serve as military and regulatory bases for financial capital continue to have global repercussions.

Yet, Beck envisions power relations in the new cosmopolitan reality as liminal and fluid because boundaries, basic rules and basic decisions have to be re-negotiated – not only those between the national and the international spheres, but also those between global business and the state, transnational civil society movements, supra-national organizations and national governments and societies. (2010 [2006]: 397 [17])

Beck and Sznaider join those poststructuralist whose imaginary is shaped by and reflects the age of digital networking. To this effect, they cite Brian Turner’s observation that ‘network society makes endless and instant dialogue’ (Turner 2004: 11). They also make reference to Neil Brenner’s observation that global, national, and local geographic scales no longer can be understood as territorially nested forms of governance (Brenner 1991). But Brenner places these rescaling processes within the power dynamics of neoliberal capital restructuring and Beck and Sznaider’s decentered approach to a world of interdependent networks fails to capture the politics of wealth extraction and political and military oppression.

The discursive move through which Beck can simultaneously note and fail to analyse power is apparent in his article, ‘Cosmopolitan society and its enemies’ (Beck 2002). The enemies of cosmopolitan society turn out to be
capitalism, globalism, and authoritarian democracy, which are presented as actor-less systems of ideas. The tendency to reduce discussions of power to abstract systems of ideas certainly lessens the appeal of a cosmopolitanism to those engaged in struggles against growing global immiseration and seeking an adequate explanatory framework.

In positing the possibilities for cosmopolitan social movements, Beck and Sznaidar note that currently people around the world are being forced to acknowledge their interdependence. They portray this growing awareness of the interconnection of people around the world as something that is generally unwelcome. They don’t explain why they think people everywhere might see mutual interdependence as foisted upon them, although they do acknowledge the contemporary re-emergence of nationalism. They provide no analysis of the political leaders, public policy makers, and prestigious scholars who actively encourage their various publics to read interconnectedness as undesirable. There is also no analysis of the positionality of those who foster feelings of national solidarity by criminalizing foreigners and denying them access to human rights.

An adequate theoretical framework should be able to help us connect the xenophobic attacks on foreigners in states as disparate as South Africa, Russia and the USA, and the way in which these states have implemented neo-liberal agendas. Despite variations in histories, public policies and rhetorics, in each of these states the public need for education, health, and safety are not being adequately met. As has happened previously in the history of many states, the category of foreigner is being used both as an explanation of the failures of the state and a whipping boy for popular discontent. At the same time, there are emerging new contradictions that make the possibility of cosmopolitan movements simultaneously more and less likely. Beck and Sznaider capture the simultaneous threat and possibility. They do less well at locating the source of the contradictions, which have to do with the structural tensions within relations of power. They see the possibilities of united action on the basis of the emergent ‘world risk society’ (2010 [2006]: 391 [11]). In their description this risk around which axes of conflict and possibility exist seems existential or natural.

Beck and Sznaider attribute the development of new ‘antagonistic groupings’ to the spontaneous growth of ‘cultural risk perceptions and definitions [that] . . . draw new boundaries . . . for a transnational risk community’ (2010 [2006]: 391 [11]). They provide no analysis of the actors who encourage, market, hone or legitimate perceptions of difference, foreignness, and risk. The role of immensely powerful corporate and financial executives and the national security apparatus of imperial states is nowhere to be seen. This is not social analysis. Contemporary social analysis must direct our attention to the actors and unequal relationships that shape and respond to struggles against injustice and deprivation.
There are scholars who along with Beck and Sznaider are indebted to feminist and postcolonial theory but use these frameworks to assess continuing structures of domination and their newly emerging networked formations (Quijano 2000). They begin the task of theorizing cosmopolitanism by asking ‘whose cosmopolitanism?’ (Glick Schiller 2009, Harvey 2009, Prakash 2009, Stacey 2009, Tihanov 2009). There is vital work to be done to theorize, learn from, and note the differences between current social movements and sensibilities and eighteenth, nineteenth century and early twentieth century transnational social movements and their cosmopolitan perspectives including various forms of internationalism displayed by labour, Pan-Africanism, anticolonialism, and feminism. These forms of internationalism were not homogenizing universalisms but built on the mutual constitution of gender, class, race, and national subordination to create agendas for struggle and visions of social equality and justice (Gabaccia and Ottanelli 2001; Gilroy 1993; Featherstone 2008). Work on subaltern cosmopolitanism that builds on the perception that various different and subordinated positionalities lead people all over the world to identify with others who are oppressed (Gilroy 2004; Glick Schiller and Fouron 2001, Featherstone 2008). We can use the terms subaltern and everyday forms of cosmopolitism to study and theorize these power-imbricated forms of socialities, which can generate normative international solidarities. We need a concept of cosmopolitanism that deploys a critique of methodological nationalism to research and theorize conditions within which people come to recognize injustice and its causes and build on situated subaltern difference to openness to all struggles against oppression.

Notes

1. In the 1980s Eric Wolf critiqued the ‘billiard ball’ theory of society and others critiqued the ‘container theory’ of society (Wolf 1982; Albrow 1995). The term methodological nationalism, had been proffered in previous decades by various scholars (Martins 1974; Smith 1983). However it was not until recently that the term took hold as a way of highlighting the tendency of social scientists to equate the nation-state with society. That this concept was one whose ‘time had come’ became apparent to me when Andreas Wimmer and I (2002) wrote about methodological nationalism, using very much the same definition as Beck, although we were unaware that he was using the term.

2. The book was published in German in 2002 and in English in 2005.

References Cited


