Locating Cosmopolitanism: Between Humanist Ideal and Grounded Social

Category

Zlatko Skrbis, Gavin Kendall and Ian Woodward

Theory Culture Society 2004; 21; 115

DOI: 10.1177/0263276404047418

The online version of this article can be found at:

http://tcs.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/21/6/115
Locating Cosmopolitanism
Between Humanist Ideal and Grounded
Social Category

Zlatko Skrbis, Gavin Kendall and Ian
Woodward

The Idea of Cosmopolitan Identity

More than 2000 years after its birth, cosmopolitanism is making
us sit up and take notice. Its Stoic parentage, Kantian upbringing
and postmodern spoiling have made it a robust but somewhat
confused adolescent. The contemporary resurrection of cosmopolitanism
theorizing owes much to the debate sparked by Nussbaum’s (1994) polem-
ic essay on patriotism and cosmopolitanism. The ensuing debate
(Nussbaum and Cohen, 1996) reinvigorated the concept but also reminded
us of its inherent promise, limitations and contradictions: while it commonly
represents a tool for radical social imagination and radical projections of
cosmopolitan democracy (Archibugi and Held, 1995; Held, 1995) and
cosmopolitan citizenship (Hutchings and Dannreuther, 1999), it is also a
catch-all phrase that renders its meaning irrelevant (Pollock et al., 2000).
We believe that cosmopolitanism may play an important role in current
theoretical debates and our contemporary political landscape—but, in its
recent manifestations, we think it falls well short of its promise.

As an abstract ideal, cosmopolitanism is no less important today than
it was in the times of Diogenes or Kant. The idea of cosmopolitanism has
‘a nice, high-minded ring to it’, as Himmelfarb (1996: 77) notes, but while
the inherently abstract utopian value of the term makes a good promise, it
does not necessarily make a good analytical tool. We concur with Holton
(2002: 154) that the notion of cosmopolitanism ‘raises questions about the
coherence of this increasingly diffuse and somewhat vague concept for purposes of social enquiry. Our approach engages with the current literature on cosmopolitanism, but refutes excessively abstract theorizations. We prefer to speak about cosmopolitanism as a progressive humanistic ideal which continues to be embedded in the structural conditions of modernity. We make a case for a more rigorous conceptualization of cosmopolitanism that recognizes the validity of two enduring characteristics of the modern era: the nation-state and citizenship (Boli and Thomas, 1999).

By understanding cosmopolitanism as being embedded in structural conditions defined by citizenship and the nation-state, we should be able to better understand not only the possibility of the transcendence of the present, but also the limits of the social. Therefore, we are steadfastly against a cosmopolitanism that fatalistically accepts the erosion of the nation-state; we are against a cosmopolitanism that allows researchers, with good conscience, to ignore questions of the government of internationally mobile individuals; and, finally, we do not see cosmopolitan scholarship advanced when the world is seen as caught up in a Manichean dialectic between Kantian, cosmopolitan perpetual peace and a brutish Hobbesian order (Kagan, 2003).

Cosmopolitanism today cannot be understood without reference to social, cultural, political and economic features of the modern globalized era, an era defined by an unprecedented interconnectedness in which identities, ideas, cultures and politics are embedded in the global and the transnational. The boundaries between home and away, local and global, traditional and de-traditionalized, and here and there, have become increasingly blurred. Beck (2002a: 80), for example, points out how more and more modern social processes show indifference to established state and national boundaries. Indeed, it is claimed, people (or at least some people) work, love, marry and live internationally and combine multiple loyalties and identities in their lives. Chernobyl, the AIDS virus, terrorism and CNN make a potent and far-reaching combination of pollution, death, fear and indoctrination precisely because of the permeability of borders. These new global interdependencies give rise to new kinds of human sociability (Beck, 2002b: 30). For Appadurai (1990) the new dynamics of time-space compression give rise to new dimensions that are captured in terms such as ethnoscapes, technoscapes, finanscapes, mediascapes and ideoscapes. These various scapes are indicative of the power of international flows, which show little regard for modernist notions of a national boundary. Thinking ‘ourselves beyond the nation’ (Appadurai, 1993: 411), beyond citizenship (Soysal, 1994), and beyond the fixities of time and space is becoming not only easier, but also increasingly vital.

Not surprisingly, rootlessness, movement, homelessness and nomadism are the motifs of the day. Bauman (1996) likens modern individuals and life to pilgrims and pilgrimage. For him, postmodern identities and individuals try to avoid fixity at any cost. Said (1979: 18–19) talks about a generalized condition of homelessness, an idea that has made its way into
many sociological and anthropological texts. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) dwell on the nomad – someone whose only real place of belonging is movement itself. Melucci (1989) writes in a similar vein, likening members of modern social movements to nomads because of their lack of long-term commitments. The metaphor of nomadism is one of the most common ways in which the tension between fixity and fluidity, sedentarianism and dispersion is thematized.

Most contemporary commentators concur that cosmopolitanism – as a subjective outlook, attitude or practice – is associated with a conscious openness to the world and to cultural differences (Hall, 2002; Hannerz, 1996; Held, 2002; Tomlinson, 1999; Urry, 2000b; Vertovec and Cohen, 2002). Our present times, in which many people have a shared sense of a world as a whole, and experience this through travel, work and exposure to the media, are thus perfectly suited to the proliferation of the idea of cosmopolitanism. The new cosmopolitan subject suffers from ‘place polygamy’, as Beck (2002b: 24) memorably remarked. The idea of kosmopolites, the citizen of the cosmos (Heater, 1999: 137) has existed for more than two millennia, but it has never seemed so real and tangible to so many people as it does today.

This openness to the world as a whole, however, is a rather vague and diffuse notion. As we argue below, researchers even disagree as to what the source of this openness is. Is this openness consciously assumed or is it perhaps circumstantially induced? While most scholars would argue unambiguously for the former, the latter seems to be the latest on the topic. It is this very basic dilemma that informs our interrogation of cosmopolitanism: the sociological research literature on cosmopolitanism gestures in certain directions, describing an orientation and perhaps even a disposition, but completely avoids analytical precision. As Hannerz (1990: 238) puts it, cosmopolitanism is ‘a perspective, a state of mind’. There are some scholars in the field of sociological theory who take this further and try to identify what qualities constitute this concept (Beck, 2002b; Urry, 2000b). However, they all stop short of making cosmopolitanism and a cosmopolitan disposition a grounded, and maybe even measurable, entity.

Conceptualizing Cosmopolitanism: Four Problems

Although we are far from advocating naked empiricism, we do believe that it is timely to rethink the excessive theorization that is characteristic of cosmopolitanism studies. We identify four major problems in the contemporary literature on cosmopolitanism. The first is a problem of indeterminacy, and is closely associated with the recent cultural studies literature that utilizes cosmopolitanism as an empty signifier that can stand for almost any given reality and aspiration. The second is a problem of identification, and attempts to answer the pressing question, ‘Who is cosmopolitan?’ The third grows directly from the first two and we call it the problem of attribution: what exactly are the determinants of cosmopolitan disposition and culture? While we turn to these three questions in the next section, the
fourth issue of government goes to the heart of the problematic associated with the contemporary deliberations of cosmopolitanism. It is through the exploration of this question that we can see cosmopolitanism as rooted in historical, political, social and economic realities of the modern era.

The Problem of Indeterminacy

We take the problem of indeterminacy to be the ultimate collapse of meaning of the concept of cosmopolitanism and the nihilistic consequence of self-indulgent theorizations of cosmopolitanism. This problem is best illustrated in the recent programmatic text by Pollock et al. (2000), which suggests that the best way to deal with the nascent possibilities of cosmopolitanism is to eschew definition or specification of what cosmopolitanism involves, or who ‘cosmopolitans’ might be. According to this argument, while the problem of cosmopolitanism comprises some of the most pressing contemporary questions related to globalization, nationalism, ethnicity and identity, by their nature the practices and attitudes of the cosmopolitan are difficult to know, perhaps even unknowable. This type of intellectual strategy is apparently designed to serve the purpose of leaving the category of the cosmopolitan entirely open, free of foreclosure by any set of academic, ethnic or metanational discourses. Such a position is predicated on the notion that the political possibilities of cosmopolitanism are promising and potentially open to damage by significant attempts at academic territorialization. For Pollock et al. (2000: 577):

... cosmopolitanism may indeed be a project whose conceptual content and pragmatic character are not only as yet unspecified but also must always escape positive and definite specification, precisely because specifying cosmopolitanism positively and definitely is an uncospolitan thing to do.

If we do not know what cosmopolitanism stands for, how can we trust these authors, for example, when they affirm that Sarajevo’s cosmopolitanism has been destroyed in the 1990s? How can we know that it was truly cosmopolitan before then? What exactly would make it cosmopolitan again? While we are open to the idea that there may be various ways of being cosmopolitan and various possible cosmopolitanisms (Pollock et al., 2000: 458), we do not recognize that this is something that logically follows from Pollock et al.’s anti-empirical premises.

When Beck defines cosmopolitan society as ‘a new way of doing business and of working, a new kind of identity and politics as well as a new kind of everyday space-time experience and of human sociability’, he concludes that ‘It is impossible to even outline this claim here’ (2002b: 30). This is precisely the kind of impotence that is inherent in current discussions on cosmopolitanism. And to make helplessness contradictory, Beck manages to clearly identify the ‘enemies’ of cosmopolitan societies (2002b: 37). Ironically, it is Beck himself (2002b: 24) who alerts us to Kant’s famous dictum which we believe applies in this case: ‘Anschauung ohne Begriff ist
blind; Begriff ohne Anschauung ist leer’ (observations without concepts are blind, concepts without observations are empty).

We do not accept that cosmopolitanism is the Holy Spirit of social science – that which cannot be called by name or interrogated. Cosmopolitanism here, it seems to us, is something of a fantasy – a comforting illusion, but one that may not be at all analytically useful.

Related to this idea of ‘indeterminable cosmopolitanism’ is the suggestion found in some literature that cosmopolitanism represents the intersection of new historical styles of social and national relations that appear to defy social-structural grounding. This literature constructs cosmopolitanism as a myth by imagining cosmopolitan spaces as free havens of cultural exchange, where ‘groups of different religious and ethnic backgrounds intermingled and exchanged ideas and lifestyles’ (Meijer, 1999:1). Yet, despite performing this mythologizing function, these creeds fail to capture the specific set of economic, cultural and social changes that facilitate the development of cosmopolitanization. As Calhoun (2002: 108) has reminded us, we need to ‘recognize the extent to which the cosmopolitan appreciation of global diversity is based on the privileges of wealth and perhaps, especially, citizenship in certain states’. The fantasy of cosmopolitanism is so appealing and effective that it discourages the attempt to tie down any real cosmopolitans; but we must resist the lure of this fantasy if we wish to make cosmopolitanism a valuable analytical concept.

The Problem of Identification

We are not suggesting that the solution associated with the problem of indeterminacy is necessarily in painstaking attempts to identify cosmopolitan subjects. Such ambition would give rise to a new set of problems that we associate with the problem of identification. In the literature we find three populations that have been represented as archetypal cosmopolitans: global business elites, refugees and expatriates.

Kanter (1995) tags the cosmopolitans as members of a ‘world class’ global business elite who possess the knowledge and skills that currently fit productively with economic transformations engendered by rounds of globalization across cutting-edge, emerging industries. For Kanter, the cosmopolitans are ‘card carrying members of the world class’ who are rich in the ‘three C’s’ (1995: 22–3): concepts, competence and connections. She argues that this gives them access to the latest and most marketable knowledge, the intellectual and social ability to operate at ‘superior’ standards anywhere in the world, and the ability to forge global networks. Kanter’s emphasis is on the business elites of the cosmopolitan class, which she defines as ‘a social class defined by its ability to command resources and operate beyond borders and across wide territories’ (Kanter, 1995: 22). Although we believe Kanter focuses too heavily on those who make up what could be characterized as the über-cosmopolitan class, by summarizing the key cosmopolitan asset as a unique ‘mind-set’ (1995: 23), a useful aspect of Kanter’s argument is its basis in the idea that cosmopolitan classes
possess forms of intellectual, social and cultural capital highly valued in the global economy. The Triple Cs are somewhat similar to Kirwan-Taylor’s (2000) cosmocrats, the people with MBAs and law degrees, complete with a rather snobbish attitude towards those not belonging to their class and with a patronizing attitude towards the cultural other. They are closer to Calhoun’s ‘frequent travellers’ than Kanter’s über-citizens, but they certainly see themselves as cosmopolitans. We might also pause a moment to reflect that these über-citizens are invariably citizens of first-world countries or belong to the privileged classes from other states whose identification is largely with Western ideals. The metaphor we might use here is that of the palimpsest – under the new cosmopolitan identity lurks the recognizable citizen of an advanced liberal democratic ‘national’ state or the monied and privileged individual from elsewhere, who just happens to be mobile.

At the other extreme to Kanter’s world-class citizens are the ‘victims of modernity, failed by capitalism’s upward mobility, and bereft of those comforts and customs of national belonging’. Accordingly, ‘refugees, peoples of the diaspora, and migrants and exiles represent the spirit of the cosmopolitical community’ (Pollock et al., 2000: 582).

Although these two radically different approaches base cosmopolitan identity on mobility across space and time, they present us with an interesting dilemma. Kanter’s definition is more in accordance with traditional understandings of cosmopolitanism because the members of her cosmopolitan class have made a choice on the basis of positive, conscious effort. Refugees, by contrast, not only lack the free will to move but may even consciously prefer to be locals and parochials – anything, in fact, rather than suffering the tragedy of their supposed cosmopolitanism. And if cosmopolitans ought to be playing ‘a high order political game’ (Kanter, 1995: 25), refugees are usually reduced to being the silent pawns in the games of others.

In both definitions, human movement in itself is seen as a key determinant of cosmopolitanism. Refugees have no other destiny but to move until they find themselves – if ever – on the receiving end of the principle of hospitality (Derrida, 2001). Both Kanter (1995) and Pollock et al. (2000) also assume that cosmopolitanism is a position of epistemological privilege per se without acknowledging the limitations of so-defined cosmopolitan positions. In the case of the business elite we can remind ourselves of the character in Anne Tyler’s (1985) novel who keeps writing spirited travel accounts for people who, although widely travelled, detest movement thoroughly and would prefer never to see anything but their own backyard and their own neighbourhood.

In a quite different way from Kanter and Pollock et al., Hannerz (1990: 243) carefully asserts that the expatriate may be most readily associated with cosmopolitanism. Hannerz characterizes expatriates very differently to refugees and the global business elite identified above. First, expatriates have chosen to live abroad, but they also can go back when they choose to. Volition and opportunity to return home are what makes them different from
refugees. They are also different from the business elite in the sense that their mobility is not predicated on high status. Hannerz refuses to grant expatriates an epistemological privilege, for they may in fact be profoundly parochial and refuse to engage with the host environment. He says it all in one memorable phrase: ‘Cosmopolitans can be dilettantes as well as connoisseurs’ (Hannerz, 1992: 253). Expatriates may stand a good chance of turning into cosmopolitans but nothing quite guarantees this outcome. Thus, for Hannerz, expatriates represent the possibility, rather than reality, of cosmopolitanism.

Caught up in the whirlpool of transnational mobility, the winners–losers dichotomy is increasingly acceptable in the cosmopolitanism literature. Beck (2002b: 33), for instance, argues that ‘Transnationality characterizes not only the globalization of elites, but the poor exploited immigrants as well.’ What gets lost in these bipolar dialectics are the sedentary underclasses and, indeed, the sedentary glocals. This removes from the kingdom of cosmopolitans not only the undisputed über-cosmopolitan of his own times, Kant, who is notorious for never leaving his native Königsberg, as well as the residents of Manila slums who enjoy their daily diet of satellite TV. Cosmopolitanism is about mobilities of ideas, objects and images just as much as it is about mobilities of people. Cosmopolitanism is not only embodied, but also felt, imagined, consumed and fantasized.

While it is important to understand that cosmopolitans should not be characterized according to this winners–losers binary, and that western cosmopolitan ideals are not the only version of cosmopolitanism (cf. Appadurai, 1991), we argue that looking for subject positions taken up by either the elites or the disenfranchised is not the best way to proceed. We do not find much comfort in attempts to put new life into cosmopolitanism by adding colourful adjectives to it. However, we find useful the recent contributions which endorse the plurality and variability of cosmopolitanisms by linking them to fields of social engagement, such as Lamont and Aksartova’s (2002) call for a study of ‘everyday, practical cosmopolitanisms’, or Werbner’s (1999) assertion – which goes directly against Kanter’s ‘elitist’ approach – of cosmopolitanism among working-class labour migrants. Our philosophical ideals must not cloud our ability to notice what Malcomson (1998: 238) calls ‘the actually existing cosmopolitanisms’. In short, our understanding of cosmopolitanism should not be constructed from a series of imaginary, utopian or ideal types; the fluidity and complexity of cosmopolitanism are only likely to be revealed by the empirical study of its mundane reality.

The Problem of Attribution

It is not easy to discern agreement in the literature as to what are the attributes of cosmopolitanism. In contrast to Kant’s Eurocentric vision of cosmopolitanism (Mignolo, 2000: 735), most contemporary authors subscribe to the idea of cosmopolitanism as a form of ‘planetary conviviality’ (Mignolo, 2000: 721), a commercially driven ‘end of insularity’ (Nava, 1998) and a
series of multiple mobilities (Hannerz, 1992; Urry, 2000a). Although there
appears to be unequivocal agreement between authors of various
persuasions in associating cosmopolitanism with positive values (such as
‘openness’), this was not always so. If anything, cosmopolitanism was used
in the not-so-distant past to label anyone who did not fit or conform, includ-
ing intellectuals, Jews, homosexuals and aristocrats (Brennan, 1997). Stalin,
for example, used the term as an accusation against ‘reactionary’ elements
in Soviet society.

Apart from agreement among contemporary authors that cosmo-
politanism designates positive, inclusive values and principles, there is a
great deal of diversity when we examine other attributes ascribed to
cosmopolitans. For Hannerz (1990), the relevant characteristics of cosmo-
politanism include being willing to engage with the cultural Other (both in
an aesthetic and intellectual sense), developing dynamic and interdepen-
dent relationships with locals (‘there are no cosmopolitans without locals’),
having a degree of competence and sense of home, or even better, a
consciousness of a point of departure. Rabinow (1986: 258) puts it simi-
larly: cosmopolitanism is an ‘ethos of macro-interdependencies, with an
acute consciousness (often forced upon people) of the inescapabilities and
particularities of places, characters, historical trajectories, and fates’. Beck
(2002b: 79–80) lists 13 different ‘empirical indicators of cosmopolitization’
that range from international travel to questions of political representation
and manifestations of ecological crises. He acknowledges that these indi-
cators lack both ‘comprehensiveness and systematic exposition’. However,
these 13 indicators are perhaps the closest we get to a systematic expla-
nation that could form the basis for an agreed upon characterization of
cosmopolitanism in the field. Unfortunately, his attempt stops short of this
possibility primarily because he fails to distinguish between commodities,
processes (travel, mobility), legal ascriptions (citizenship) and collective
loyalties (national identity).

Urry (2000b) and Held (2002) are much more selective and precise
in their listing of cosmopolitan practices and dispositions. In Held’s view,
there are three requirements of cultural cosmopolitanism. These include
the recognition of the interconnectedness of political communities, an under-
standing of overlapping collective fortunes, and an ability to empathize with
others and to celebrate difference, diversity and hybridity. For Urry, the
cosmopolitan is characterized by an ability to be mobile, the capacity to
consume diverse cultural symbols and goods, a willingness to take risks by
virtue of encountering the ‘other’, the ability to reflexively observe and judge
different cultures, the possession of semiotic skills to interpret images of
others, and general openness to other people and cultures. However,
considering the working nature of Urry’s (2000b) report, it is difficult to
ascertain the extent to which these domains have been helpfully translated
into analytical categories. However, an interesting example of this trans-
lation is Lamont and Aksartova’s (2002:1) definition of cosmopolitanism in
terms of a practice ‘used by ordinary people to bridge boundaries with
people who are different from them’. Lamont and Aksartova understand cosmopolitanism as a cultural repertoire of ‘particular universalisms’ by which individuals understand human similarities (2002: 2–3). Thus they report that the sorts of strategies used by French workers differ from those used by American workers in that the former deploy unique historical and collective referents, yet both base their practices on similar universalistic discourses. While they do not specify cosmopolitan categories, they usefully encourage us to think beyond the limitations of current ways of conceptualizing cosmopolitan practices.

It is our assertion that understandings of cosmopolitanism are continuously frustrated by the reluctance of social theorists to define the parameters of the concept and to reach more than minimal agreement on its attributes. This is partly because, in addition to being a social category, it is also increasingly understood as a social ideal (Hollinger, 1995). We concur with Beck (2002a: 97) that available data suffer from ‘immense problems of comparability’. However, the same applies to attempts to define social class or ethnic identity, where both are co-determined by issues of culture and self-perception, as well as micro- and macro-social contexts. However, the success of the social sciences in coming to grips with class and ethnicity may provide useful models and analogies for cosmopolitanism research. It is by understanding and mapping the particularities of cosmopolitan existence that we shall begin to make some progress in this area. Unfortunately, it seems to us, the general assumption that cosmopolitanism is a form of (Kantian) universalism has led many scholars to believe that it can only be understood as an ideal type. However, cosmopolitanism is a lived experience, and one that does not necessarily shy away from particular, local forms.

Globalization, Cosmopolitanism and the Problem of Government

Beck (2002a) discusses cosmopolitan society as ‘a second age of modernity’, representing a paradigmatic shift from societies operating within the nation-state framework. For him, cosmopolitan society not only enforces solidarity with strangers, but also creates conditions for a legally binding world society of individuals. In line with the articles assembled in Cheah and Robbins (1998), we also take the view that there are different ways in which such an open orientation may emerge, rather than a single liberal Western pathway. In this sense, there are cosmopolitanisms rather than one single form of cosmopolitanism; resistances and blockages to cosmopolitanism are countered and stimulated by the accelerational dynamics of economic, cultural and symbolic capital (Beck, 2002a).

There is some tension between the idea of cosmopolitanism as a pluralist concept (there are different cosmopolitanisms and people are cosmopolitan in different ways) and the purported origin of cosmopolitanism in Western philosophical thought (Vertovec and Cohen, 2002: 14–16). Is the cosmopolitan worldview a view from nowhere, as van der Veer (2002: 165) provocatively puts it, or is it a view of the world from a particular,
Western angle? For Calhoun (2002: 90), there appears little doubt that cosmopolitanism is ‘a discourse centred in a Western view of the world’, while van der Veer (2002: 166) calls it the Western and profoundly colonial engagement with ‘the rest of the world’. There is some productive tension in this West vs the Rest dilemma (Featherstone, 2002: 3), although we see it as largely superseded by existing research on non-Western cosmopolitanisms (e.g. Werbner, 1999; Zubaida, 2002). What matters most in this context is not whether cosmopolitanism is a Western invention but, rather, whether it can serve as a shared universal value, applicable across different cultural contexts.

For commentators such as David Held, cosmopolitanism holds out the hope of a new type of citizenship. In this scheme, the old political order, which was closely tied to nation-states, has its individual analogue in the citizen, who participates in politics at a variety of levels (borough, city, nation). But a new political order needs a new type of transnational citizen, a cosmopolitan who is no longer ‘anchored in fixed borders and territories’ but instead pursues ‘basic democratic arrangements’ at the level of cities or regions – and especially transnationally (Hirst and Held, 2002).

The cosmopolitan, then, becomes the micro-unit, or the agent of change, in a move to a new form of global government. One form of this has been sketched out by George Monbiot (2000), who argues that new forms of global government can be built up from a grassroots level. Now, while it does seem to be the case that new forms of international government are being invented (an obvious example being the development of the powers of the European Union), it nonetheless seems to be the case that the basic unit of accountability is still the nation-state, and thus the intervention-point of government must remain the citizen of the nation-state, rather than the cosmopolites. As Hirst and Held (2002) argue, it is notoriously difficult to keep multi-level government accountable: at least in the case of the nation-state, there are already mechanisms in place to remove failing (or failed) political actors. At the governmental level, then, it seems that there are strong pressures at work to keep political actors local/national rather than to foster cosmopolitan sentiments. A key question would seem to be: is it possible to build a global democracy, and if so, are our cosmopolitans the key? As an ideal, it sounds laudable – a fantastic reversal of Plato – but perhaps we should remain sceptical about the possibility of the development – any time soon – of cosmopolitan global democracy. Hirst and Held, again, deflate the cosmopolitan optimist by arguing that modern democracy developed on the basis of ‘sovereign territorial states that had made a huge effort to homogenize their populations, create national languages, common traditions and shared institutions’ (Hirst and Held, 2002). In short, especially for Hirst, democracy requires cultural homogeneity to function and this homogeneity – in its civic and ethno-national versions – is provided by nation-state governments (Hirst and Held, 2002). However, it is important that we draw attention to a certain ‘mythic’ element to the homogeneity of the nation-state. Any such homogenization came about, not infrequently,
at the cost of the oppression of minorities (religious, ethnic and indigenous). The homogeneity of the nation-state is often an effect of the triumph of its ruling elites.

The existing debates on cosmopolitanism, particularly those that emanate from a cultural studies’ perspective, take precious little notice of these structural realities. But there have been a number of notable interventions made in recent times in relation to this issue. Beck (2002b: 34) talks about ‘the limits of transnationality [that] continue to be drawn within national spaces’ and Turner (2002: 56) critiques Nussbaum’s call to create the new ‘citizens of the world’ without discussing that such new subjects would ‘require a global government to enforce the rights and obligations of citizens. While I can in principle vote in a democratic government as a citizen of a state, I cannot currently enjoy many or any rights as a “global citizen”’. Appiah (1996: 28) similarly emphasizes that we cannot ‘think away’ the state – after all the existing ‘cultural variability that cosmopolitanism celebrates has come to depend on the existence of a plurality of states’. For Appiah, one of the most important tasks of any cosmopolitan agenda would be to ‘defend the right of others to live in democratic states with rich possibilities of association within and across their borders’ (1996: 29). This is not a glorification of the institution of the state. Instead, we see it as recognition of one of the basic structural elements of the contemporary social landscape.

The implications of these arguments may seem excessively pessimistic, but are definitely worth noting. If this argument is valid – and we certainly believe that it has been unjustly omitted from much of the existing discussion – then the cosmopolitan, detached from the grip of the nation-state, may be irrelevant to ‘real’ politics, which will continue to be at the level of the nation-state and below. A cosmopolitan detached from the state and intoxicated by unspecified universalism and openness would be a fantasy, and a risky fantasy at that: we do not think it wise to encourage individuals to think of themselves as global citizens if there are no effective global governmental mechanisms. For example, given the lack of any effective global taxation system, cosmopolitans may come to think of themselves as removed from any ethical compulsion to pay taxes to national authorities. Citizens who flourish under such conditions will surely be those who possess healthy accumulations of various forms of capital. Our position is that nation-states are the best hope of keeping citizens in check. The other side of this coin is that nation-states are also our best hope of keeping them free, since the cosmopolitan citizen cut loose from national responsibilities would also lose national rights.

However, in recent sociology and political science, it is perhaps the case that the ‘modernist’ state system has undergone various kinds of marginalization and even repudiation. For example, John Rawls (1993, 1999) has outlined the vision of a modern global peace – a cosmopolitan age – in which moral rational individuals will attain international justice. Rawls’s vision is of a renewal and reinvigoration of the Westphalian
settlement – like Westphalia, cosmopolitanism will usher in a new age of
tolerance. Yet, for its part, globalization theory and cosmopolitanism
marginalize Westphalia, identifying it with a system of states whose defining
characteristic, sovereignty, is a thing of the past; a victim of global economic
forces and universal human rights (Buchanan, 2000; Held et al., 1999;
Strange, 1996). In addition, multicultural theory outlines a new postmodern
politics in which the democratic state will directly represent its moral
communities (Bader, 1999; Taylor, 1994) in a system that breaks free from
the shackles of the nation-state.

Of course, we need not be so damning of Westphalia or its state system,
nor should we be so ready to embrace a new cosmopolitan world order that
will replace Westphalia. If the events of 11 September 2001 have taught us
anything, it must be that our understanding of global politics has been
somewhat flawed. It seems to us that in the period from 1989 to 2001, the
West was able to bask in its ‘triumph’ over communism, and indulge in
Fukuyama’s (1992) argument about liberal democracy as the only mode of
government in a global polity. This notion of progress, in which liberalism’s
competitor modes of government (socialism, communism, anarchism,
authoritarianism and totalitarianism) had fallen or were in their death
threes, was starkly refuted by an upsurge of international terrorism and the
global complexities associated with it (Urry, 2002). While the Cold War
lasted, the West made the mistake of assuming that the grid of world politics
was reducible to a zero-sum game between liberal and communist mental-
ities (in spite of occasional attempts to invent ‘Third Way’ politics). Following
the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, it
seemed that the way was cleared for a new form of universal liberal citizen-
ship; cue a revival of interest in cosmopolitanism. A future in which the
citizens of the former Soviet Union were ‘liberalized’, and eventually ‘Euro-
peanized’ (that is to say, admitted into a pan-European economic state)
seemed within touching distance. Yet as if the ethnic and religious struggles
in the Balkans were not evidence enough, the events of 11 September 2001
brought home to the West that some older, and perhaps partially forgotten,
lines of separation – those of religious and cultural attachments – had never
been completely erased.

All of this is not to say that the nation-state system is here to stay
forever and that the possibilities of its transcendence should not be
explored. The Hegelian idea that every social system already contains the
seeds of its own destruction and suppression may well apply. Beck (2002b:
50) expresses this possibility when comparing the ultimate achievement of
the Peace of Westphalia (the separation of Church and state) with the possi-
bilities of the cosmopolitan state:

Just as the a-religious state finally made possible the peaceful coexistence of
multiple religions side by side the cosmopolitan state could provide the
conditions for multiple national and religious identities to coexist through the
principle of constitutional tolerance.
From the Conceptual to the Empirical: Dimensions of the Cosmopolitan Disposition

The search for an exemplar subject as a Holy Grail of the cosmopolitan spirit is not the most productive intellectual investment. We assert that for such a thing as ‘cosmopolitanism’ and ‘cosmopolitans’ to exist apart from an imaginary space, some broad conditions must be met. Instead of seeking to understand the cosmopolitan as a vague identity, and in doing so render it substantially emptied of a social basis, in the following section of this article we seek to delineate definitional criteria in order to conceptualize the notion of cosmopolitanism. We propose that pursuit of dimensions of the cosmopolitan outlook should proceed with at least two related principles in mind. First, we need to agree on the types of attitudes and dispositions that distinguish cosmopolitans from non-cosmopolitans. Relatedly, we should identify the structural conditions within the spheres of cultural production and consumption which tend to nurture these cosmopolitan dispositions.

The first set of conditions relates to the identification of individuals with particular attitudinal characteristics (encompassing beliefs, attitudes and values) which can be identified as cosmopolitan and which would distinguish them from non-cosmopolitan characteristics. We define this aspect of cosmopolitanism as the ‘cosmopolitan disposition’ and assert that there should also be identifiable ‘carriers’ of such cosmopolitan dispositions.

Although the term ‘disposition’ is gaining currency in the cosmopolitanism field (e.g. Featherstone, 2002: 1; Vertovec and Cohen, 2002: 14), it is through Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of the habitus that we develop our understanding of this term. Bourdieu understands the habitus to be a set of principles and procedures that come into play in people’s relations with objects and others. It is a set of self-orienting, practical dispositions. The habitus is formed in individuals through historically and socially situated conditions, and while a person’s habitus will direct them toward particular choices, it does not amount to obedience to rules. In defining the habitus, in shorthand, as ‘a system of dispositions’ (Bourdieu, 1977: 214), Bourdieu clarifies three aspects of what he means by disposition, with the most particular component being that it is a ‘predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination’ (Bourdieu, 1977: 214). As we have specified, commentators commonly suggest that in terms of ‘disposition’, cosmopolitanism should be understood principally as an attitude of ‘openness’ toward others cultures (Hannerz, 1996; Tomlinson, 1999; Urry, 2000a; Vertovec and Cohen, 2002).

The notion of openness, however, is rather vague and diffuse. How is such openness manifested, and what are the sentiments that are embedded within the general attitudinal category of openness? In the first instance, we suggest that ‘cultural openness’ can be manifested in various ways, including, as Urry (2000b) points out, in both intellectual and aesthetic domains. In addition, we suggest it must also involve emotional and moral/ethical commitments. Emotional commitment is demonstrated by an empathy for...
and interest in other cultures, which fuses intellectual outlooks with dispositions centred on such things as pleasurable personal experiences or exposure to media that predispose one to react positively to the idea of contact with other cultures. Closely related to this is a recognition that much openness to other cultures and places derives from a strong ethical commitment to universalist values and ideas that are expected to reach beyond the local (Bauböck, 2002: 112). Cosmopolitanism, in other words, entails a distinct ethical orientation towards selflessness, worldliness and communitarianism. The close connection between ethical commitment and cosmopolitan disposition has been one of the key characteristics of cosmopolitanism since the Stoics, but it became distinctly pronounced in the modern era, characterized by the seemingly unstoppable thrust of time-space compression fuelled by information technologies and the media. It is these distinctly ethical commitments that drive much of the contemporary environmental, anti-war and anti-globalization movements.

In sociological research, there have been few attempts to operationalize and understand empirically what these engagements are and how they might be identified. Using focus group research and content analysis, Urry (2000b) has made progress toward establishing aspects of the everyday reception and interpretation of cosmopolitan texts in the media. Urry’s exploration of understandings of cosmopolitanism revealed that media representations have effectively created, via the production and dissemination of cultural symbols through advertising music and television, a substantial foundation for the consumption of banal cosmopolitan images. On the basis of this, Urry finds that consumption of such visual and narrative ‘stagings of contemporary global life’, and the understandings of globalism they engender, may lay the groundwork for the emergence of a cosmopolitan civil society. In an analysis of Australian survey data on popular attitudes to globalization, Holton and Phillips’ (2001) study effectively operationalizes the economic and political dimensions of the concept, including attitudes towards protectionism, policies of the United Nations and foreign economic investment. In terms of cultural, emotional and ethical attitudes and dispositions, which we see as forming a crucial component of the cosmopolitan outlook, Holton and Phillips’ conceptualization is less useful, telling us little about the cultural dimensions of change, the reasons behind it, and the ways individuals adopt and adapt cosmopolitan or global outlooks, manners and consumption styles. Yet their data do tell us who is more likely to be positively disposed to accepting globalization: those who have travelled or lived in another country, those who have used the Internet and made overseas phone calls, those with higher levels of education, and (to a lesser extent) men rather than women and younger rather than older respondents. Clearly, more research needs to address the specific elements of a cosmopolitan disposition as opposed to the related, and often economically laden, concept of globalization. However, given a greater emphasis on cultural outlooks, Holton and Phillips’ approach exemplifies one important way such data may be collected and analysed. In contrast, Lamont and Aksartova’s
(2002) approach is decidedly culturalist, using in-depth interviews to study cultural practices and repertoires used among working-class men. They reject the elitist assumptions of the literature that focuses on cosmopolitanism as a strategy of the upper middle classes. Their interview data show how cultural groups use particular universalistic discourses to bridge boundaries of difference. Rather than a cosmopolitanism grounded in the consumption-based celebration of multicultural identities, Lamont and Aksartova find references to universal principles of human nature which ‘enable people to resist racism’ (2002: 18) as evidence of ordinary cosmopolitanism.

In socio-political research, the idea of cosmopolitan dispositions has had some salience over a longer period of time. Most recently, Robinson and Zill (1997) have defined cultural cosmopolitanism as an openness to cultural products free of local or national prejudices. They find a strong positive correlation between cosmopolitanism and the level of educational attainment, especially for those who studied social sciences and humanities courses. Further, women scored higher than men, as did black respondents and younger people. Interestingly, cosmopolitans were also found to have a more positive and optimistic outlook and to be more satisfied with their lives generally. In attempting to distinguish between locals and cosmopolitans as political actors, Dye (1963) defined cosmopolitans in terms of having an interest in non-local happenings, taking a non-parochial attitude toward local events and issues, and rejecting ‘big city’ values. Likewise, Jennings (1966, cited in Robinson et al., 1993) defined cosmopolitanism as an outlook beyond the local, particularly in relation to national and international events. Even earlier, in his study of influence in a small town, Merton (1957) distinguished between locals and cosmopolitans on a similar basis – cosmopolitans were those whose outlook was national rather than local. As Hanmerz (1990: 237) points out, such a distinction now seems rather parochial given levels of international integration.

In addition to this, our review of the literature shows that the cosmopolitan attitude is defined by a series of beliefs, attitudes and personal qualities. The notion that there can be ‘banal’ or ‘mundane’ versions of the cosmopolitan attitude as well as ‘authentic’ versions is useful as a preliminary distinction. Billig (1995) has highlighted how forms of banal or vernacular nationalism such as flag-waving, singing national anthems or engaging in ersatz re-enactments of key moments in a nation’s history can serve to reinforce collective national sentiments, despite their apparently trivial or inconsequential nature. Urry (2000b) applies this distinction to a discussion of banal globalism in his empirical study of the reception of cosmopolitan media images, and Hebdige (1990) has called attention to how people can be mundane cosmopolitans simply through consuming media images. Thus any measure of cosmopolitan attitudes must differentiate between these mundane or ‘unreflective’ forms of cosmopolitanism and what can be referred to, somewhat problematically perhaps, as authentic or ‘reflective’ cosmopolitanism. Indicators of the mundane or unreflective forms
of cosmopolitanism include: the types of food one consumes, consumption of heavily packaged or mediated cultural and tourist experiences, and the unreflexive consumption of ethnic ‘styles’ in dress or music (the lead characters in the British TV show *Absolutely Fabulous* give us an acerbic portrayal of such mundane cosmopolitanism). Such expenditures of time and resources involve merely cursory commitment to genuine cosmopolitan attitudes, but further empirical research must unravel the ways in which mundane consumption may come to be associated with genuine cosmopolitan outlooks. In his critique of the class basis of cosmopolitan elites, Calhoun cautions similarly: ‘food, tourism, music, literature and clothes are all easy faces of cosmopolitanism, but they are not hard tests for the relationship between local solidarity and international civil society’ (Calhoun, 2002: 105). Nava’s (1998) historical account illustrates how cosmopolitan discourses were incorporated into commercial promotions by Selfridges department store in early 20th-century London. While Selfridges was ‘founded at the height of British Imperialism’ it promoted a ‘cosmopolitanism which was modern, urban and cultured’ (Nava, 1998: 166) by its demonstration of intellectual and aesthetic openness through advertising, store facilities and layout and promotions. While this was a deployment of cosmopolitanism that was related to the growth of modern consumer cultures, representations of luxury and display, and the imbrication of conspicuous signifiers of identity, Nava argues that this does not necessarily diminish its critical or transformative efficacy as a cultural text. Indeed, she suggests that the selling of these ‘mundane’ or ‘domesticated’ (Nava, 2002: 94) forms of cosmopolitan styles goes hand in hand with more fundamental and progressive social structural changes. They may, in fact, be the harbingers of wider social changes.

The sociological literature suggests that cosmopolitan attitudes are typically linked to a number of social-structural characteristics. Chaney (2002) has recently described how shifting aesthetic and cultural economies, coupled with the rising importance of cultural citizenship, have generated the possibility of deploying cosmopolitan symbols as signs of distinction, at least for select groups within a population. He defines the cosmopolitan cultural citizen as having heterogeneous tastes, and the ability to transcend native culture by adopting a learned indifference to local goods (Chaney, 2002: 158). Cosmopolitans are geographically and culturally mobile. As Hall (2002: 26) has recently put it, cosmopolitanism requires the ability to draw upon and enact vocabularies and discourses from a variety of cultural repertoires. The cosmopolitan has the technical and intellectual resources or ‘capital’ to gain employment across national boundaries, and typically has an ability to traverse, consume, appreciate and empathize with cultural symbols and practices that originate outside their home country. In this sense, we could think of cosmopolitans as similar to the cultural omnivore identified in recent literature on aesthetic tastes, who has an ability to appreciate and discern rules and repertoires associated with cultural symbols or forms that originate across cultural boundaries.
These consumers, assumed to be part of a new middle class, have an openness and ‘desire to participate in or “sample” other social and cultural worlds’ (Wynne and O’Connor, 1998: 858). Whether they are best understood as a class, a category or even ‘tribe’ of cosmopolitan consumers who actively and conspicuously consume global cultural goods, or whether such consumption is merely circumstantial, ordinary or ‘unreflexive’, is something further empirical research could usefully address (see for example, Edmunds and Turner, 2001). Whatever the conclusion, the patterns of consumption of these emerging omnivores suggest affinities between them and what we term ‘cosmopolitan consumers’.

It is from Peterson’s research on cultural consumption that the groundwork has emerged for an understanding of the emergence of the omnivorous, cosmopolitan consumer. Peterson (1990) asserts that the World Music genre, defined as incorporating music of non-Western origin, is likely to be the preferred music of the affluent baby-boomers, and predicts that it may replace classical music as the music of the intellectual classes into the 21st century. Van Eijck (2000: 216) speculates that one attraction of these forms of music ‘lies in the musical experiment and the juxtaposition of diverse musical elements’. But more than this, such cosmopolitan omnivorousness becomes a symbol of social status and of one’s moral worthiness. More broadly, it is a particular type of cultural capital that demonstrates one is able to appreciate the cultural products and practices of others, suggesting openness and flexibility, which are ‘important resources in a society that requires social and geographical mobility, “employability”, and “social networking”’ (Van Eijck, 2000: 221). Such a credential is an important emergent form of capital, argue Peterson and Kern (1996: 906).

While snobbish exclusion was an effective marker of status in a relatively homogeneous and circumscribed WASP-lish world that could enforce its dominance over all others by force if necessary, omnivorous inclusion seems better adapted to an increasingly global world managed by those who make their way, in part, by showing respect for the cultural expressions of others.

Concluding Remarks: Beyond the Impasse?
The concept of cosmopolitanism that has recently re-emerged as a way of understanding the consequences of increased social interactions across cultural and political boundaries has established a promising field of theoretical endeavour by focusing questions related to globalization, nationalism, population movements, cultural values and identity. Yet what characterizes recent cosmopolitanism discourses is an idealist sentiment that indulges in excessive self-reflexivity and consequently has left unspecified the empirical sociological dimensions of the concept. To a large degree, this ‘armchair philosophy’ has emphasized the possibility of cosmopolitan attitudes generating cross-cultural goodwill and inclusive global outlooks. Cosmopolitanism, while usefully co-opted into contemporary social commentary, is a
concept heading for a crisis unless we develop a sense of agreement on its analytical dimensions.

We can reduce our critique of the existing theoretical and political limitations of cosmopolitanism discussed so far to the following two issues. First, as it is currently used in the literature, the concept of cosmopolitanism is poorly specified. Cosmopolitanism is in danger of becoming all things to all people, and so we make a ‘modernist’ call for a social science specification of cosmopolitanism; of course, there may be some who regard this as a crime against a ‘postmodern’ possibility. Second, cosmopolitanism is somewhat politically naïve and it contains within itself a certain utopian drive to construct a new world of tolerant, world-sensitive sensibilities. Yet despite the emphasis on these new sensibilities, and indeed an emerging variety of cosmopolitanisms, it often overlooks the way that many contemporary cosmopolitan projects tend to fall between the cracks of an old tension between the relationship of the West and the Rest. If we take this argument to an extreme, cosmopolitanism is not yet free of the risk of being seen as colonialism under another banner.

For us, there are some simple steps to take to reinvigorate the cosmopolitan research agenda. First, we believe that it must be purged of its political utopianism. Cosmopolitanism will not change the world; however, it may prove a very interesting series of practices in the reformation of the Western Subjektivitätsprinzip. Second, it must take on a rather more modest ethical component. We cannot assume that cosmopolitanism is good, or that it will make the world a better place. It might be better described as another iteration in Western liberal forms of self-government and self-understanding; no doubt cosmopolitanism is not solely a Western ideal, but it has made a notable recent appearance in the Western humanities and social sciences. Finally, and most emphatically, cosmopolitanism needs to be pinned down empirically. How can we decide what makes a cosmopolitan citizen? How can we distinguish between this creature and an old-fashioned T.H. Marshall-style citizen? These final empirical questions we leave for future work, yet surely they are the fundamental way in which the field of cosmopolitanism can move beyond the impasse.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank Mike Featherstone and four anonymous referees for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.

References


Hall, S. (2002) ‘Political Belonging in a World of Multiple Identities’, in S. Vertovec...


Zlatko Skrbis teaches sociology at the University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia. His publications include Long-distance Nationalism (Ashgate, 1999) and papers on nationalist imagining in a diasporic context, religion, gender and history of sociology. He is vice-president of the Australian Sociological Association and vice-president of the International Sociological Association Research Committee on Ethnic, Race and Minority Relations.

Gavin Kendall is Senior Lecturer in sociology at Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia. Recent books include Using Foucault’s Methods (Sage, 1999) and Understanding Culture (Sage, 2001), both written with Gary Wickham, and The State, Democracy and Globalization (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), with Roger King.

Ian Woodward is a lecturer in sociology at the School of Arts, Media and Culture, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia. Most recently, he has published on narratives of aesthetic judgement and consumption methodologies (Journal of Material Culture, Journal of Sociology), consumerism and disorientation in postmodern spaces (British Journal of Sociology), and on everyday understandings of good and bad taste (Poetics).