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Introducing Trieste: a cosmopolitan city?

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In this introductory piece, I use the concept of cosmopolitanism as a framework around which to discuss both Trieste the city and the papers that make up this special themed issue. Intriguingly, Trieste relates closely to two of the principal discursive worlds around which contemporary understandings of cosmopolitanism have been built: the more restricted usage by historians and anthropologists referring to the cities of the eastern Mediterranean, which I call here Oriental cosmopolitanism, and the aspirational cosmopolitanism of current debates around new forms of European (and indeed world) governance, which I have called European cosmopolitanism. In both these senses, Trieste prompts reflection on what cosmopolitanism may mean, not least in its passage through periods of ethnic division and conflict. I conclude by echoing the sentiments of Minca and Bialasiewicz in their contributions to this themed issue and suggesting that Trieste might indeed be well placed to serve as laboratory for a cosmopolitan European future.

Key words: Trieste, cosmopolitanism, Europe, multiculturalism, urban identity.

Trieste as vehicle for cosmopolitanism

Running through so many accounts of Trieste is a sense of the city’s cosmopolitan past—sometimes projected into the promise of a cosmopolitan future. It is above all this vision of the city as cosmopolitan, in all the potentiality of the concept, that gives Trieste a meaning extending beyond the city and enabling it to become a sort of spatial metonym for something larger, an ideal of how to live together in a European setting. This paper is designed both as an introduction to this special issue on Trieste and as an interrogation of the concept of cosmopolitanism. I use cosmopolitanism here as a conceptual tool to bring the papers together and to ask some questions about the nature of urban identity (or social identity in an urban context). Trieste is an extremely well-suited vehicle for discussing and dissecting the meanings and possibilities inherent in cosmopolitanism because it enshrines two related worlds of meaning that have been bestowed on the term. One is specific, grounded in events and locations: discussions of port cities (especially but not only those in the eastern Mediterranean) as cosmopolitan centres; I have called this Oriental cosmopolitanism in reference to the exotising settings in which representations of these port cities were so often framed. The other, which I refer to as European cosmopolitanism, is much broader, a more generalised discussion of cosmopolitanism in the modern European world of territorially bounded nation-states.
Trieste relates to both these worlds of meaning; and not only that, it does so in such a way as to prompt reflection on the difficulties and possibilities of the concept. More specifically, Trieste’s history furnishes uncomfortable but provocative episodes for a discussion of cosmopolitanism and its intersection with nation-state and urban territory. This is a subject on which there are considerable divergences in the literature; the contributors to this special issue argue that when nation comes to be anchored to territory in the form of nation-state, cosmopolitan connections and possibilities suffer seriously.

While there are many different approaches to cosmopolitanism, many different ways of defining the term and of defining cosmopolitan practices and dispositions, there seems to be general agreement that cosmopolitanism indicates both an individual disposition or attitude and a transformative collective purpose (Vertovec and Cohen 2002). It is perhaps not surprising therefore that discussions of cosmopolitanism have tended to privilege human actors and have had more difficulty reading cosmopolitanism into specific geographic settings (other than to suggest, in often rather vague ways, that such-and-such a city was/is cosmopolitan). This is hardly surprising, it might be said, as cosmopolitanism by definition transcends the local. And yet, as various writers have argued, there is no real contradiction between cosmopolitanism and rootedness (Kofman 2005; Tarrow 2001). Collective social life is for so many people lived out in the setting of a city, and cities create a favourable backdrop for cosmopolitan imaginings and practices, drawing in people from locations both near and far (Featherstone 2002; McFarlane 2008). Trieste, while never a particularly large city, is a significant setting nonetheless for the size and importance of its port, the diversity of its population, for its later position as a contested border city, contested between divergent national identities in search of a territorial, nation-state fix, and for recent premonitions of Trieste’s potential role as a city transcending nation-state and anchoring a new, and cosmopolitan, region.

The authors of contributions to this special themed issue consider Trieste in both a historical and contemporary time frame. Minca writes about the city in the context of empire, nation-state, and urban entity. Indeed, in reflecting wistfully on the ‘dream’ that was Trieste’s urban cosmopolitan identity, Minca argues forcefully that when identity is hooked on to a national territory, the cosmopolitan project is doomed. Purvis too addresses the nature of the relationship between port city, imperial state and nation-state. He reminds us that Trieste was a cosmopolitan port city brought into being by an imperial state, arguing that its inhabitants, and especially members of those national collectivities invited to migrate into the city, enjoyed wide measures of freedom; in so doing, he raises questions about the nature of cosmopolitanism in port cities. Bialasiewicz explores the link between cosmopolitanism and Europe, ‘thinking Europe through … Trieste’, as she puts it. Colombino, and Purvis and Atkinson raise the issue of Trieste’s perceived cosmopolitanism (although Colombino interrogates the notion of multiculturalism, a point I shall return to) and concern themselves with some of the contradictions and conflicts that spring from failures of the cosmopolitan imagination in contemporary Trieste.

That certain contradictions and conflicts have arisen in the last two decades or so is ironic. The dismantling of the Iron Curtain offered Trieste a renewed sense of European centrality—or at any rate the chance to serve as a metaphorical port of embarkation for those setting off to conquer Balkan markets.
Then, some fifteen years later, just as a certain fatigue was setting in, an even more exciting opportunity presented itself. Trieste was declared capital of a new Euro-region, first of its kind, consisting of the Veneto, Friuli Venezia-Giulia (of which Trieste is capital), and Carinthia in southern Austria, and soon to include all of Slovenia and Croatian Istria (Rauber 2007). Trieste, it seemed, had (re-)discovered its ‘natural vocation’. ‘Trieste’, in the words of a government minister attending the signing of the Euro-region pact, ‘will be able to undertake choices in the domain of urban and economic affairs now that it has been allocated the role that is its natural vocation, a role that historical events had denied it for decades’ (Bolis 2007).

Given the resurgent claims for Trieste’s centrality, it is no coincidence that Trieste has become in the last few decades the subject of considerable literary and academic interest. Some of the recent fictional work set in Trieste is reviewed by Bialasiewicz in her paper in this issue, while other major Italian-language works on Trieste provide many elements of the canvas on which Minca paints his picture of Trieste. While it is not the intention here to indulge in a full-scale review of the literature on Trieste, which is far too extensive to allow for a brief excursion, I will pick out a few recent contributions. Ballinger has written widely on Trieste and in particular on the meaning of home and exile in the proximate and yet distant spaces of Trieste and the Istrian Peninsula (2003a). She has also, in a separate work (Ballinger 2003b), reflected on different treatments of Habsburg nostalgia within the context of Trieste. Struck by certain silences in accounts of Trieste, she considers how Trieste has been imagined as a cosmopolitan city by three authors of recent works on the city. Of these, Jan Morris’ evocative tableau (2001) reaches out to a wide audience, but Ballinger shows how Morris has constructed her vision of Trieste’s past within an uncritical understanding of the city’s cosmopolitan myth. In other recent work, Ballinger (2004a) has explored the difficulties and divisions caused within the city by the re-opening of old wartime taboos occasioned by the end of the Cold War. It is no wonder then that, as Ballinger suggests, some writers have sought a brighter future through recourse to Trieste’s cosmopolitan past.

In this most written-about city, Pizzi reviews the often anguished search for a Triestine identity, a triestinità, amongst the city’s twentieth-century writers (Pizzi 2001). Of other notable recent English-language accounts of the city, Sluga (2001) has encamped herself on that most slippery of spaces, the border separating Trieste from territories to the east. From this ‘vantage point’ she explores the convoluted history of the city caught on the edge of three worlds. The mutations in the identity of elite and ordinary Triestines during these decades of angst and turmoil, and the position that the city attempted to secure for itself vis-à-vis Rome and central Europe especially in the interwar period is examined by Hametz (2000, 2005). An earlier period in Trieste’s history provides the material for Dubin’s study (1999). She examines the growth of Trieste’s Jewish community in the context of their relationship with the Austrian state. The increasingly full picture of Trieste and its history that presents itself through the work of these authors and others writing in English is greatly augmented by a considerable body of literature in Italian. An older generation of historians and intellectuals have contributed significantly to the richness of the literature on the city. Many of these writers are discussed and their ideas developed by Minca in this special issue, including Elio Apih, Angelo Ara
and Claudio Magris, and both Minca and Bialasiewicz refer to one of the most influential of all accounts of the city and its shifting identities, that of Ara and Magris, *Trieste: un’identità di frontiera* [*Trieste: A Border Identity*], first published in 1982. The writers of the papers in this special issue have been able to avail themselves of a number of recent publications, foremost among them two compilations, edited by Finzi and Panjek (2001) and by Finzi, Panariti and Panjek (2003), the contributors to which discuss the whole gamut of social, economic and cultural issues that shaped Trieste in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In the remaining pages of this introductory paper, I use the concept of cosmopolitanism and the sense of Trieste as a cosmopolitan city as a framework around which to introduce the other papers in this special issue. At the same time, and in doing so, I hope to show that Trieste possesses certain attributes that make it a powerful vehicle for geographical reflection. It forces us to think geographically, to think about the meanings of place and of affection for place and the expression of this affection in poetry and prose, as in the works of writers such as Italo Svevo and Umberto Saba. It is a city whose inhabitants animate multiple worlds, to use a metaphor that grows out of the work of Scipio Slataper, a central figure in Triestine literature: worlds that are urban, national, cosmopolitan, and again Italian, Slav, and Germanic. It ends up forcing one out of easy conclusions and compelling one into a sense of the multiplicity of human territorial identities.

### Oriental cosmopolitanism

A claim for cosmopolitanism as being a feature particular of Mediterranean port cities has been made by various writers, in particular in recent accounts by Driessen (2005) and Sifneos (2005). Echoing Robbins’ call to define ‘actually existing cosmopolitanisms’ (1998: 2), they ‘situate’ cosmopolitanism in the Mediterranean and its ports, focusing their inquiry on the ports of the eastern Mediterranean. ‘It is clear’, Driessen writes, ‘from the Izmir and Alexandria cases that we not only need a working definition of “cosmopolitanism”’, but also a way to avoid mistaking ideological claims about cosmopolitanism for factual descriptions (2005: 136). But not everyone living in these port cities was cosmopolitan: ‘The “cosmopolitanism” label mainly applies to certain categories of people, particularly merchants, brokers and seamen who played a key role in pan-Mediterranean and supra-Mediterranean networks’ (Driessen 2005: 138). First among these cosmopolites were the Jewish communities, some of which, as in the case of Salonica, were very large and prominent. The Greeks too formed prosperous and well-connected trading communities throughout the eastern Mediterranean and well beyond it. But there were many others besides, Venetians and Serbs as well as British and French.

The cosmopolitan communities of the eastern Mediterranean were threaded together by family links that were at the same time commercial ties. They were protected, according to Driessen, by the millet system.

The cosmopolitics of the eastern Mediterranean port cities, involving multilingualism, religious plurality, openness, enterprising ethos, intercultural exchange and at least a weak form of tolerance, were rooted in the Ottoman millet system of non-Muslim communities that were granted protection and relative autonomy. It was fed by the fast economic growth of port cities in the second half of the nineteenth century. (Driessen 2005: 138)
Discussions of contemporary cosmopolitanism have yet to establish a link with these accounts of cosmopolitan communities in the eastern Mediterranean. Nevertheless, they frequently refer back to a sort of golden age of cosmopolitanism, an ‘actually existing’ age that overlaps with the period in which the cosmopolitan communities of the eastern Mediterranean flourished. Central and eastern Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was largely under the control, albeit an ever looser one, of the three largely land-based empires, Habsburg, Ottoman and Tsarist Russian. It was under the aegis of these three empire-states that the maritime cosmopolitan communities flourished. “Cosmopolitanism”, for Sifneos, ‘refers to the manifold expressions of an “international culture”, expressed by the commercial elites before the shaping of national identities’ (2005: 98). Before the age of nation-state, empires allowed for the co-mingling of various peoples. Others, however, have not seen national sentiment as being in any way antithetical to cosmopolitanism. Drawing on the work of Kant, Pheng Cheah argues that cosmopolitanism’s antonym is not nation but state. ‘Prior to its annexation of the territorial state, nationalism is not antithetical to cosmopolitanism’ (1998: 25). Cosmopolitanism, he goes on to say, is only equated with ‘exilic migrancy’ once nation has been anchored to territory; this is an argument developed in this issue by Minca in the context of Trieste, its nazioni and the evolving meanings of nationhood.

In drawing our attention to this crucial transformation from national identities favourable to cosmopolitanism to an expanding world of nation-states greedy for the total allegiance of their citizens, Cheah contrasts the political and intellectual conditions that prevailed when Kant was writing and compares them to those that existed only half a century or so later when Marx was writing. By the middle of the nineteenth century the idea that nation and state should be bolted together was widely accepted, and Europe was well on its path of transformation into a territorial jigsaw puzzle of supposed nation-states. Marx saw bourgeois capitalism as an essentially cosmopolitan force, challenging the position of the nation-state and involving itself in expansive operations in search of resources and markets. Marx advocated a cosmopolitan proletariat, more than simply an international movement, a collectivity acting and thinking beyond the nation-state. Marx, famously, had written in an article on the maritime commerce of Austria published in the *New York Daily Tribune* that Trieste was run by ‘a motley crew of speculators’; it had the advantage, he wrote, of ‘not having any past’ (Marx 1857).

When Marx wrote these comments, in 1857, Trieste’s first railway link with Vienna was just being completed, one of a number of events that changed the city’s role from classic entrepot and emporium to transit city for goods bound onwards into the European continent. This was a pivotal transformation for the city, one that changed its nature and its rationale, and encouraged the growth of processing industries in and around the city, which in turn sucked in Slovenian migrants from the hinterland. In this special issue of *Social & Cultural Geography*, Purvis builds his account of the city’s history around this and a number of other turning points, some of which he sees as being of major importance, while others—like the cessation of the city’s free port privileges—were seen as heralding dislocation at the time but, he argues, probably had less actual effect on the city’s fortunes.

Purvis centres his discussion around two axes: first, the technological and economic
changes that saw Trieste’s role as a trading centre change, and secondly Trieste’s relationship initially with Vienna and later with Rome. He sets Trieste alongside the ‘cosmopolitan cities’ of the eastern Mediterranean, arguing that they provide a counterweight to Taylor’s argument about the subsuming of cities by nation-states in an earlier period of historical development (Taylor 2004, 2007). This is not to suggest that all these cities shared similar trajectories in every sense. Cosmopolitan city though it might have been, Trieste was, Purvis reminds us, to all intents founded by a state, the Habsburg Austrian state, and its cosmopolitan society was the product of state design. The privileges that were granted above all to the Jewish community but also to other ‘nations’ were granted by the state, and they were strictly ‘privileges’, revealing the state’s ‘tolerance’ for these nations because of the benefits they would bring. Trieste was, in other words a state-orchestrated cosmopolitan city. In the words of Dubin, Trieste’s ‘commercial raison d’être and its cosmopolitan mercantile class were designed and engineered by the absolutist state’ (1999: 4). But it was commerce that animated Trieste, and, Purvis argues, Trieste’s historical evolution depended as much on economic as political change, being forged by a complex relationship between the two.

Minca, in his contribution to this special issue, refers to the myth and reality of Trieste as a cosmopolitan city. Trieste’s cosmopolitan nature is inherent in its multi-nationality. Triestinità, the consciousness of being Triestine, springs from the city as home to many nations, as a città del mare (city of the sea), a city without territory. Minca’s cosmopolitan Trieste is expressed in its bourgeois mercantile class. This is ‘the city of rampant bourgeois capitalism par excellence, relatively free of the ties of the state’). Perhaps indeed this is what drew Marx’s attention to the city. Minca’s main focus is on ‘the progressive disintegration of the cosmopolitan project of the “Trieste Nazione” and the triumph of territorial nationalisms’. The crucial period comes in the decades following 1848, when first Vienna asserted a greater degree of control over the city and then the Slovenian presence became ever more pronounced. The old cosmopolitan elements began to take up a nationalist hue. Minca, following Cheah, links the decline of the cosmopolitan city to the mooring of nation to territorial state.

A distinction is perhaps to be drawn, or so Purvis suggests, between the allegiances and identities adopted by much of the bourgeoisie, increasingly pro-Italian and anti-Slovenian, and the elite of Trieste, still for the main part loyal to Vienna and loyal therefore to the myth of cosmopolitan Trieste. The lines of cleavage were complicated; Ballinger (2003b: 93) reminds us of the apparent paradox ‘that Trieste’s cosmopolitan and irredentist ideologies were jointly forged and mutually reinforcing’. But this is not really a paradox at all, Ballinger argues; writers such as Italo Svevo and Scipio Slapater, whose works form the cornerstone of Trieste’s literary heritage, managed both to express in their work the spirit of Mitteleuropa and to support the irredentist cause.

A number of real paradoxes, however, lie at the heart of Minca’s paper, paradoxes that manifest themselves, so to speak, as absences. These absences were felt with growing keenness through the second half of the nineteenth century: the absence of Motherland Italy; the absence of Vienna, Trieste ‘abandoned by Austria’; and the absence for Trieste’s Slovenians of a Slavic nation, with state and capital. Later, after World War II, Trieste is marked by a further and more entrenched set of absences: the absence of Italy, which fobs Trieste off with subsidies; the absence of its Istrian
hinterland; and, again, the absence of a Slovenian homeland.

These absences experienced by the inhabitants of Trieste were both unique to their situation and also transferable to that of other cosmopolitan port cities of the Mediterranean—and to some extent—of other, non-maritime ‘cities of empire’. The plurality of ‘nations’ was a feature not only of Trieste but also of Salonica, Izmir and Alexandria, nations either lacking a territorial state at all or lacking one in the city’s immediate hinterland. Where Trieste was, perhaps, different was in its location on the border between two, increasingly competing ethno-cultural worlds, Italian and Slav, with their ill-defined territorial markers, while at the same time functioning as the main port for the only remaining central European empire-state.

**European cosmopolitanism**

Clearly, if Trieste as a city stands for anything, it stands for an identity that supersedes a definition of nation that is rooted in the territorial container of the nation-state. The particular poignancy of Trieste’s situation lies in the rapid historical move from being a relatively cosmopolitan city-in-empire to becoming first an ethnically divided Italian outpost and then an isolated border garrison town for the Italian nation-state. Meanwhile, in this later period, hard across the border lay Yugoslavia, an unusual attempt in the European context to freeze ethno-national difference within largely multi-national republics that were part of a federal state. While that experiment failed, Trieste now entertains the prospect of re-establishing for itself a cosmopolitan European future.

Trieste then has plausible claims to being, at some stages in its history, cosmopolitan and is, incontestably, European. But what is European cosmopolitanism? What is cosmopolitanism if not European, or Euro-centric? The roots of the cosmopolitan are, Bauman writes, ‘deeply sunk in the European experience’ (2004: 43; Fine 2003). Contemporary definitions of cosmopolitanism are generally traced back to Kant and his attempts to think through a world order that would both transcend the state and be orchestrated by the state (Cheah 1998; Fine 2006). As I have already noted, cosmopolitanism is not anti-theitical to nationalism as such, but is so to the demands of the nation-state. It sits more easily within empire. Imperial states are more ready to accept plural allegiances or identities than nation-states.

But if cosmopolitanism is European in its origins as a concept, is it the sole prerogative and preserve of Europeans today? Or perhaps that question should be rephrased. Is there anywhere in the world today that is not Europe? Bauman has written of ‘Europe’s urge to remake the rest of the world’ (2004: 13). The world became for a period of some centuries Europe’s *lebensraum*. In Bauman’s words, ‘Europe needed/wanted both … the richness to replenish the depleted royal coffers, and the lands to accommodate men and women for whose physical survival or social ambitions there was not enough room at home’ (2004: 14). But, Bauman reminds us, ‘those long centuries of one-sided, inequitable trade now rebound on Europe, facing it with the daunting task of consuming locally the surplus of planetary history’ (2004: 14).

There have been various recent attempts to extricate the concept of cosmopolitanism from this Euro-centricism: one involves opening it out of its bourgeois class domain to have it include ‘subaltern’ lives, lives of the excluded, refugees, gypsies; another opens it out of a Euro-centric world to include those whose
lives have been (or perhaps still are) cosmopolitan in contexts that are completely extra-European (Kofman 2005; Pollock, Bhabha, Breckenridge and Chakrabarty 2000; Vertovec and Cohen 2004). Such would be the case with Islamic modernity, represented for example in the lives and practices of the Murid Brotherhood (Diouf 2000). Sometimes a case has been made for a cosmopolitan sensibility that is both subaltern and extra-European. Such a claim is made, for example, for Senegalese and Bangladeshi traders on the streets of Barcelona (Kothari 2008)—and could be similarly made for those in Trieste. And indeed, one should add here the community of Chinese shopkeepers, coming mainly from the east-coast city of Wenzhou and its environs, whose shops are today such a prominent feature of Trieste, as they are of so many other Italian and Balkan cities. Their lives are shot through with cosmopolitan potentialities.

These twinned projects—to wrestle cosmopolitanism out of its bourgeois and European lair—are laudable, but they are fraught with difficulty. Not the least of these difficulties is the problem of traceability—how do we recognise these subaltern cosmopolitans (Featherstone 2002)? And again, how does one confront the moral connotations without which the concept of cosmopolitanism has no meaning. If expatriates can be cosmopolitans, then why not migrants, and if migrants, then surely also displaced persons, asylum seekers, over-staying asylum seekers facing deportation, and so on. If they are not cosmopolitans, then is it because their actions run counter to the interests of contemporary states? The ever expanding but ever tighter external borders of the European Union create their own form of confusion about who is cosmopolitan and what is cosmopolitanism. They privilege a certain sense of what it means to be a cosmopolitan European and detract from other senses. They remind us that the cosmopolitan—whether Jewish, gypsy or more recently Islamic—has often been an unwelcome figure in Europe, seen to have loyalties that are dangerously divided (Kofman 2005).

Our understandings of what Europe may mean are, therefore, central to our perceptions of cosmopolitanism. Bialasiewicz, in her paper, uses Trieste as a prism with which to engage with Europe, and more specifically with a cosmopolitan Europe. Europe—and Trieste alongside it—is misunderstood when it is conceived of as a ‘container of diversity’. She sees in the many works of fiction set in Trieste, as well as in the discourse of politicians, ‘a fetish for ... multi-cultural “diversity”’. But to think in terms of diversity is simply to understand Europe as a bed of conflicting nationalities—seeking some form of accommodation, it is true—rather than as a transformative project. Instead, Bialasiewicz directs our attention to Edgar Morin and to his conceptualisation of Europe in terms of a ‘bubbling cauldron’, a ‘whirlpool’. In the context of Trieste, this plays itself out as a process of transformation into Triestinita.

Europe, and Trieste with it, is prone to a second myth, Bialasiewicz suggests, a second misunderstanding. This is the myth of a loose European/Triestine identity, ‘not fully defined’, lacking ‘a fixed identity of its own’. In literary sketches of the city or critiques of Triestine writers, such an ‘identitary indeterminacy’ is portrayed, Bialasiewicz argues, as something charming and eccentric. But to cast and define it conceptually in such terms is misleading, and even dangerous.

Bialasiewicz instead seeks to ‘conceptualise the European/Triestine complexus in ways that incorporate contradiction; that do not require identitary closure, completeness, full (territorial) definition’. She frames her reflections through references to Ara and
Magris’ seminal work *Trieste: un’identità di frontiera*, and argues that this supposed vagueness is in fact a strength in allowing space for a sense of identitary Triestinità to develop. Similarly, on a European level, European identity undergoes a process of constantly being forged, but is none the weaker for that. Bialasiewicz here refers to the ideas of Bauman. European culture, Bauman argues, is always in the making, it is always ahead of itself. Europe as an ideal is always pulling ahead of Europe as a political reality—in Bauman’s words, ‘the “essence of Europe” tends to run ahead of the “really existing Europe”’ (Bauman 2004: 5).

This is a particularly interesting argument in the context of contemporary Trieste, recently appointed capital of the new Euro-region (to which a name, at this writing, has yet to be assigned). Here, perhaps, we see how Trieste too is running ahead, offering a new vision of European potentialities. As Minca points out in his paper, both Italian and Triestine politicians have loudly proclaimed Trieste’s centrality in the Europe of the future. On the eve of Slovenia’s accession to the European Union, Romano Prodi, then president of the European Commission, addressed assembled dignitaries from the stage of the Giuseppe Verdi theatre in Trieste. ‘Everything conspires’, he declared, ‘for Trieste to become the centre of gravity … Here you have a great opportunity to move out of the margins and become the centre.’ And, according to the same article in Trieste’s leading newspaper, *Il Piccolo* (Giani 2004), ‘after insisting that the European Union is a “union of minorities”, Prodi reiterated one last time: Trieste should be prepared because, with the admission [into the EU] of the Balkan countries which will sanction the true unification of the Old Continent, it will be “still more the centre of gravity”’. This call was echoed on 29 November 2007, on the declaration of Trieste’s new status as capital of the Euro-region, by Stefano Fantoni, director of Trieste’s International School for Advanced Studies, “‘We propose again emphatically the fact that Trieste can place itself as centre of Mitteleuropa’” (Bolis 2007).

**Discordant notes**

It is instructive indeed that Prodi referred to the European Union as a ‘union of minorities’. This is a hugely suggestive term in the context of European (and therefore of world) history. There is no doubt a message for Trieste embedded in this term. One should not forget what Ballinger (2003b) for one reminds us: that Trieste has also, especially in the last century or so, been the centre of deep identitary divisions. The Fascist suppression of Slavic identity in the 1920 and 1930s, with its accompanying menace of violence, was followed for much of the second half of the century by a mood of sullen suspicion of the Red and Slav Other on the far side of the very near border, a suspicion fed by the dispossession and flight to Trieste of large numbers of Italians from the Istrian peninsula.

The fall of the Iron Curtain posed significant problems for Trieste. While the city was expected by some to start realising its vocation as a sort of vanguard of the geographical centre, casting its eyes to the east, it was riven by disputes and the re-opened wounds of events covered over by the folds of the Iron Curtain. Many in Trieste were far from sure about the direction in which they wanted to move. Much of this hesitation was (is) ‘anti-cosmopolitan’, issuing from the right or far right, and rooted in a different concept of Trieste, Italy and Europe, one that is nationalist and territorially grounded. It was (is)
prickly and quick to feel affront. We see it in the following off-key response to the declaration of Trieste’s new status in the Euro-region, quoted in *Il Piccolo*:

It remains to be seen how the Euro-region will develop. This is the message from Trieste’s deputy mayor and provincial leader of the [post-Fascist] National Alliance, Paris Lippi. ‘Everything that can bring to the city a central role can but be a source of satisfaction, but we want to see what constructive results there will be, given that [the then regional governor] Illy’s many empty-vessel [roboante] projects, of which this is one, have never led to anything concrete. Let’s see the facts: and in the meantime, let’s wait to see whether the parties that once attacked us for our relations with Haider [the governor of Carinthia] and with the “Nazis”, as they put it, will suddenly have something to be proud of.’ This was Lippi’s gibe. (Bolis 2007: 3)

Much of the initial impetus for the Euro-region was provided by Trieste’s former mayor, Riccardo Illy, who went on to become governor of the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region until his unexpected defeat in the 2008 elections. Illy was a forceful, even visionary, advocate for the supra-national Euro-region and for a cosmopolitan Trieste. Despite Illy’s ‘projects’, however, in many areas of political and cultural life in Trieste, Triestine identity has remained a source of conflict, with a consequence huge symbolic weight attached to what should be relatively straightforward political events. A prime example, discussed by Purvis and Atkinson in their contribution to this issue, is the celebration of Italy’s national day of liberation on 25 April. The centre-right administration in Trieste that succeeded Illy’s regime has tended to remain silent or indeed to acquiesce in far-right moves designed to reinforce ‘Italian’ supremacy in the city.

Relations in *contemporary* Trieste with Slovene-speaking Italians—or is it Slovenians living in Italy? (Ballinger 2004b)—are periodically troubled, and these troubles form the basis for Purvis and Atkinson’s examination of the events (observed first-hand by Purvis and this author) that surrounded the commemoration ceremony held in the former extermination camp, the Risiera di San Sabba, on 25 April 2003, and the aftermath of these events.

These difficult engagements with past events and sometimes volatile relations with the Triestine ‘Other’ inject a discordant note into Trieste’s potential to serve as an urban setting for cosmopolitan life. This discordant note is thrown into relief by Colombino in her paper in this issue, which deals not directly with cosmopolitanism but with multiculturalism, and in so doing draws attention to the potential shortcomings of a stand-alone multiculturalism at its points of intersection and of disengagement with cosmopolitanism. Colombino’s concern is with the extent to which official representations of the city as multicultural—designed to promote the city’s (unsuccessful) candidature for the 2008 World Expo—match the perceptions held by residents of Trieste. Most of her interviewees, Colombino finds, were able to relate appreciatively to the representation of Trieste as multicultural. But there were two important exclusions. In the first place, several interviewees explicitly ‘bracketed off’ ‘the Italian-Slovenian issue’. And secondly, there was a suggestion that Triestine multiculturalism did not extend to the many Chinese living in Trieste, seen by a respondent from the Italian-Slovenian community as being ‘scary’ and reluctant to integrate. Other interviewees tended to endorse the image of Trieste as ‘multicultural’ but related it to the city’s Habsburg past. Colombino’s conclusions are mixed. On the one hand, she relates that ‘what the marketers called Trieste’s...
“multiculturalism”—whatever that might be (perhaps the “spirit of Trieste” as one of my informants once called it)—is perceived by many Triestines as embedded in their city’s everyday life’. On the other hand, the image of multicultural Trieste conveyed by the authorities and their market consultants was built around the figure of the cosmopolitan scientist. It was, Colombino argues, a multiculturalism of the elite. It involved carefully air brushing out of the picture Italian and Slovenian identitary distinctions for fear of drawing attention to sources of tension and difference. Not surprisingly, therefore, it gave rise to a sort of exclusionary multiculturalism. Multiculturalism could perhaps be seen as the contemporary, Euro-cosmopolitan version of the tolerance that characterised Oriental cosmopolitanism. Tolerance meant the state’s acceptance of difference so long as there was something to be gained from it. As for multiculturalism, the danger is that it slips into an essentialising celebration of cultural difference, an expression of aesthetic cosmopolitanism, to use Kofman’s term (2005), an escape from engagement with political and spatial injustices (Bunnell 2008; Kobayashi 1993; Mitchell 2004). It lacks the strong individually driven transformative purpose, with its collective potential, characteristic of cosmopolitanism.

Towards a new golden age of Trientine cosmopolitanism?

As the contributors to this special issue on Trieste suggest, the city’s unusual history equips it well to serve, to paraphrase Minca, as a laboratory for the production of an alternative modernity, a new European space. Built to serve an empire-state, Trieste flourished as a result of the activities of its ‘cosmopolitan collectivities’. The city flourished, and within it a spirit of urban, Triestine identity was generated, cosmopolitan in its successful absorption of different nations, in its freedom from the obsession of the nation-state with territory and borders, and in its outreach to similar cosmopolitan port cities around the Mediterranean and beyond. Trieste was the cosmopolitan link between central Europe and the Mediterranean.

That the city succumbed to nationalist passions driven by fear is hardly surprising, given the trajectory of European history. But the nationalist imperative was never total, in the same way that the city’s cosmopolitanism was never all-embracing. Even in its last irredentist decades as port of empire, Trieste’s cultural and commercial elites were Triestine first and something else second. And even in Trieste’s somnolent decades of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, when the rest of Italy was enjoying its ‘miracle years’, Triestines were involved in daily, weekly and seasonal acts of border transgression. Whether it was for petrol, picnics or summer weekends by the sea, they would cross the border as readily as Yugoslavs funnelled into Trieste to buy jeans, junk and essentials in their ritual obeisance to Western consumer culture.

Today, Trieste has a large population of Italians from the south of the country, especially from the region of Puglia on the Adriatic coast of southern Italy. But the city also has its sizable Chinese community, which has taken over some of the shops from which Yugoslavs were once served. It has a significant Serb minority, many of whose members are recent additions to the older community. There are Albanians too, and north and west Africans. Some of the building blocks of cosmopolitanism are there. But what Trieste has above all today is the chance to (re-) establish its position as centre of a portion of
Europe (a Euro-region if you will) that disregards national territorial borders and serves as an urban blueprint for an exciting vision of a Europe without lines drawn through it.

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References


Abstract translations

*Introduction à Trieste: une ville cosmopolite?*

Dans cet article préliminaire, j’emploie le concept de cosmopolitisme comme un cadre autour duquel discuter à la fois de la ville de Trieste et des articles qui composent ce numéro spécial à thème. De façon intéressante, Trieste est étroitement liée à deux des mondes principaux discursifs autour desquels les conceptions actuelles du cosmopolitisme ont été construites: l’utilisation plus restreinte par des historiens et des anthropologues qui considèrent des villes de la méditerranée orientale, que j’appelle ici cosmopolitisme Oriental, et le cosmopolitisme aspirant à des débats contemporains au sujet des nouvelles formes de gouvernance européenne (et en effet de gouvernance mondiale), que j’appelle le cosmopolitisme européen. Dans ces deux sens, Trieste provoque la réflexion sur laquelle le cosmopolitisme peut signifier, du moins au vue de son passage à travers des époques de division ethnique et le conflit. Je conclus avec un rappel des sentiments de Minca et Bialasiewicz dans leurs contributions à ce numéro à thème et en suggérant que Trieste pourrait en effet être bien placée pour servir de laboratoire pour un futur européen cosmopolite.

*Mots-clefs*: Trieste, cosmopolitisme, Europe, multiculturalisme, identité urbaine.

*Presentando Trieste: una ciudad cosmopolita?*

Con este artículo introductorio, utilicé el concepto de cosmopolitism como esquema del cual discutir la ciudad de Trieste también como los ensayos que constituyen este número especial. Curiosamente, Trieste tiene una relación cercana a dos de las esferas discursivas del cual la cosmopolitism contemporánea ha sido hecha: el uso más limitado por históricos y antropólogos que se refiere a las ciudades del Mediterráneo oriental, aquí llamado la cosmopolitism Oriental, y la cosmopolitism
anhelada del último debate sobre nuevas formas de gobierno Europeo (y efectivamente mundial), aquí llamado la cosmopolitanidad Europeo. En los dos casos, Trieste se provoca una reflexión sobre el significado de la cosmopolitanidad, sobre todo su paso por períodos de división étnica y conflicto. Para concluir, resueno los sentimientos de Minca y Bialasiewicz expresados en sus contribuciones a este número temático, sugiriendo que Trieste podría servir bien como laboratorio por un futuro cosmopolita Europeo.

**Palabras claves:** Trieste, cosmopolitanidad, Europa, multiculturalismo, identidad urbana.