Working Papers
www.mmg.mpg.de/workingpapers

Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity

Max-Planck-Institut zur Erforschung multireligiöser und multiethnischer Gesellschaften

MMG Working Paper 09-08 • ISSN 2192-2357

STEVEN VERTOVEC

Cosmopolitanism in attitude, practice and competence

Steven Vertovec
Cosmopolitanism in attitude, practice and competence

MMG Working Paper 09-08

Max-Planck-Institut zur Erforschung multireligiöser und multiethnischer Gesellschaften,
Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity
Göttingen

ISSN 2192-2357 (MMG Working Papers Print)

Download: www.mmg.mpg.de/workingpapers

MPI zur Erforschung multireligiöser und multiethnischer Gesellschaften
MPI for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen
Hermann-Föge-Weg 11, 37073 Göttingen, Germany
Tel.: +49 (551) 4956 - 0
Fax: +49 (551) 4956 - 170

www.mmg.mpg.de

info@mmg.mpg.de

Author

STEVEN VERTOVEC is Director of the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity (MMG), Göttingen, and Head of its Department for Socio-Cultural Diversity.

Vertovec@mmg.mpg.de

This article is forthcoming in *Diasporas: Concepts, Identities, Intersections*, K. Knott and S. McLoughlin (eds), London: Zed Books.

As a growing set of recent literature demonstrates, cosmopolitanism has become a topic of considerable attention particularly in light of globalization, new modes of transnational interconnectedness and increasing ethnic diversity. Much interest in cosmopolitanism concerns its ethical or philosophical dimensions, especially regarding questions of how to live as a 'citizen of the world'. Other dimensions concern normative political issues that are deemed cosmopolitan, such as global governance structures or forms of international intervention. With reference to general notions of diaspora (considered here as an imagined community living away from a professed place of origin), however, it is sociological dimensions of cosmopolitanism that are of perhaps most relevant. Hence this article addresses the question: What is the nature of 'cosmopolitan' social attributes arising from conditions of diaspora?

In the nineteenth century, cosmopolitan traits were largely associated with rootlessness, characterizing individuals (particularly Jews) who – due to their tendencies to be mobile, to speak several languages, and to have open political views – were believed to belong not really anywhere. In an age of consolidating national identities, therefore, cosmopolitans were often rather suspect and unwelcome.

By the middle of the twentieth century, cosmopolitan attributes were associated with an elite class (or jet-set, following the introduction of commercial jet airplanes in the 1950s). These were people whose wealth, social activities and leisure pursuits took them to exotic locations where they interacted with people of similar socio-economic standing drawn from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Consequently cosmopolitans were often characterized by well-travelled experience, sophisticated style and savoir faire.

Today this sort of elite cosmopolitanism might best be characterized by international business class professionals. However since the 1990s, and concomitant with the growth of studies concerning diasporas and transnational communities, social scientists have increasingly drawn attention to characteristics of 'working class cosmopolitans' such as labour migrants and other non-elites spread throughout global diasporas (cf. Werbner 1999). This is what some scholars also point to by way of modes of 'actually existing cosmopolitanism' (Robbins 1998), 'everyday cosmopolitanism' (Ang *et al.* 2002) and 'tactical cosmopolitanism' (Landau and Haupt 2007). Elite or not, of what does such contemporary cosmopolitanism consist? Drawing on a range of literature, it is suggested that we might understand cosmopolitanism as comprising a combination of attitudes, practices and abilities gathered from experiences of travel or displacement, transnational contact and diasporic identification.

Attitude or orientation

Most writers on the topic would agree that fundamental to cosmopolitanism is a kind of personal stance toward cultural difference. As Ulf Hannerz (1996: 103) has put it, cosmopolitanism is based on 'an orientation, a willingness to engage with the other… an intellectual and aesthetic openness toward divergent cultural experiences'. This could be described as a kind of xenophilia, or penchant for diversity. The experience of living in conditions of diaspora, or in fact engaging in transnational life spread across two or more global settings, exposes individuals to cultural differences that may give rise to such cosmopolitan views.

In a unique study, Steffan Mau, Jan Mewes and Ann Zimmermann (2008) have researched the relationship between transnational ties and broad cosmopolitan attitudes. With surveys designed to test whether cross-border social ties and activities have an impact on people's attitudes and worldviews, Mau and colleagues measured key attitudinal traits such as openness toward difference and the capacity to reason from the point of view of others. Finding a positive correlation between the transnationalization of life worlds and the cosmopolitanization of attitudes and values, Mau et al. suggest that,

> People with cosmopolitan attitudes and values are characterized by their recognition of others because of their value and integrity as human beings, quite independently of their national affiliations. They share an open and tolerant world view that is not bound by national categories but is based on an awareness of our increasing economic, political and cultural interconnectedness, which they perceive as enriching rather than threatening. (Ibid.: 5)

Consequently, we might say, being a member of a diaspora or transnational community doesn't automatically produce cosmopolitan attitudes, but certainly the potential for this is high.

Practices or skills

Individuals and communities in diaspora have always been faced with the challenge of simultaneous adapting and maintaining traditions, practices and identities – what Martin Sökefeld (2000: 23) calls the 'diasporic duality of continuity and change.' While selectively sustaining or indeed enhancing their own particular cultural prac-

tices and institutions, people in diaspora also adopt and transform cultural phenomena drawn from others around them. Much of this arises through the simple strategy of 'When in Rome, do as the Romans do': eating like, dressing like, talking like and conforming to the behavioral norms of a 'host' society. The motivations for doing so might entail pleasure, ease of interaction, better understanding, social or economic advantage, social distinction or sheer survival.

One model for adopting others' cultural practices is the wolf-in-sheep's clothing, whose implementation entails a conscious act, based on specific knowledge of the right thing to do in the right circumstances and undertaken purposefully for some kind of advantage. This is in contrast to the cultural chameleon, who assumes others' ways non-consciously with subtle communication cues to signal commonality or to attempt shared meaning.

What are the mechanisms – conscious or non-conscious – by which cosmopolitans develop and utilize such multiple cultural competence, or ability to draw from various cultural registers? Various approaches to this question are possible. One is represented by script theory (see e.g. Schank and Abelson 1977). This examines structures of knowledge or the organization of memory through reference to 'scripts', conceived as sets of pattern recognition or causal chains of thought and behavior obtained through frequently experienced events (such as acquaintance with the sequence of events and behavior in going to a restaurant, based on previous visits to restaurants). In this way a cosmopolitan would acquire and use appropriate cultural knowledge and practice through gathering, recognizing and applying cross-cultural scripts.

Echoing Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, another of approach is through considering culture as a kind of 'tookit'. Here cultural attributes drawn from a number of sources throughout one's life are understood as a set of resources from which one can construct diverse strategies of action, situation-by-situation. This means, according to Ann Swidler (Ibid.: 281), that people engage in their everyday activities by 'selecting certain cultural elements (both such tacit culture as attitudes and styles and, sometimes, such explicit cultural materials as rituals and beliefs) and investing them with particular meanings in concrete life circumstances.' The cosmopolitan accumulates such a repertoire from an array of cultural influences and appropriately enacts selected elements as the circumstances require.

Yet another approach arises through linguistic analogy. In this way cosmopolitanism might be understood as akin to bi- or multi-lingualism. Aspects of culture can be conceived as similar to modes of linguistic communication including grammars, syntaxes and lexicons. With the skill to strategically or inadvertently use the right cul-

tural expressions, cosmopolitans are adept at what linguists call code-switching (see especially Rampton 1995). Roger Ballard (1994: 31) underlines the analogy between cultural and linguistic practice, emphasizing that 'Just as individuals can be bilingual, so they can also be multicultural, with the competence to behave appropriately in a number of different arenas, and to switch codes as appropriate.'

These are just a few ways in which the mechanisms of cosmopolitan practice can be assessed. However, it should be recognized that the uses of cultural markers, drawn from a range of sources through individual diasporic or transnational experience, are not unbounded. As stressed by Ayse Caglar (1994: 34),

> [T]he debris of our past experiences are not immediately usable, since they are already embedded in structures in which they have meanings. These limit their immediate use in producing new arrangements. The ability to take what seems fitting and to leave out the rest is the outcome of a particular set of conditions. To be able to take elements and structures out of their context and create new arrangements with ones from different sources, certain conditions need to be fulfilled. Moreover, these juxtapositions and bricolage are not random, nor do they represent a chaotic jumble of signs. In their hybridity, they still tell a story. They have an organizing principle or principles. The objective is then first to identify the conditions that enable this drastic uprooting of elements and practices from very different sources, and second to explain the organizing principle(s) of their recombination and resetting….

Caglar's points provide a significant corrective to perspectives toward hybridity, cosmopolitanism, multiple identities and similar concepts which often suggest an unbridled horizon of cultural appropriation and enactment. She importantly reminds us that social actors' actions are embedded in a constellation of relations and structures, and that actions of transnational actors are, indeed, multiply embedded. Hence to gain a fuller comprehension of cosmopolitan practices, in every case we need to ask: what is the 'package' of meaning-carrying traits that has to be read, engaged, performed, and how is it embedded in class, locality, gender, religion, age, sexuality, 'sub-culture' and other configurations of social meaning?

Abilities or competences

In addition to attitudes and practices, cosmopolitianism is also said to entail 'a personal ability to make one's way into other cultures through listening, looking, intuiting and reflecting' (Hannerz 1990: 239) and a kind of cultural competence, 'a built-

up skill in maneuvering more or less expertly with a particular system of meanings and meaningful forms' (Ibid.). Peter Koehn and James Rosenau (2002: 114) have sought to elaborate just what kind of skills or competences are acquired through transnational experiences that enable individuals to 'participate effectively in activities that cut across two or more national boundaries.' Grouped under a series of types, their list includes:

Analytic competence
- Understanding of the central beliefs, values, practices, and paradoxes of counterpart cultures and societies – including political and ethnic awareness;
- Assessment of the number and complexity of alternative cultural paths;
- Ability to discern effective transnational strategies and to learn from past successes and failure;

Emotional competence
- Motivation and ability to open oneself up continuously to divergent cultural influences and experiences;
- Ability to assume genuine interest in, and to maintain respect for, different (especially counterpart) values, traditions, experiences, and challenges;
- Ability to manage multiple identities;

Creative/imaginative competence
- Ability to foresee the synergistic potential of diverse cultural perspectives in problem solving;
- Ability to envision viable mutually acceptable alternatives;
- Ability to tap into diverse cultural sources for inspiration;

Behavioral competence – Communicative facility
- Proficiency in and use of counterparts' spoken/written language;
- Proficiency in and relaxed use of interculturally appropriate nonverbal cues and codes;
- Ability to listen to and discern different cultural messages;
- Ability to avoid and resolve communication misunderstandings across diverse communication styles;

Of course, not all of these attributes are developed or utilized at once; rather, 'Actors possess components of the several skills in varying degrees and in different mixes'

(Ibid.: 2002: 114). Each of these kinds of cosmopolitan competences might best be understood along a continuum from incapable to proficient.

With regard to the persons who acquire and develop such competences, the notion of cosmopolitan cultural competences produced by diasporic and transnational lives resonates with the range of concepts that researchers in Sociology and Cultural Studies have invoked to convey better a sense of mutability in the cultural practices of migrants and ethnic minorities. These includes notions of (cultural) translation, creolization, crossover, cut 'n' mix, hyphenated identity, bricolage, hybridity, syncretism, third space, multiculture, inter-culturalism and transculturation.

This article has outlined features of attitudes, practices and abilities that can be associated with experiences of travel or displacement, transnational contact and diasporic identification. This gives rise to a significant question: can cosmopolitan attributes be taught, fostered or instilled in people who themselves don't have such diasporic or transnational experience? In part at least, this seems to be objective of multicultural education, 'inter-cultural competence' courses, diversity management initiatives within corporate and public sectors, events and spaces created for cross-cultural contact, and a range of public campaigns promoting tolerance and the valuing of diversity.

Not all diasporas entail open acceptance of diversity and willingness to engage with others. To be sure, many diasporas often include hardened identities, reified cultures and reactionary nationalisms (Vertovec 2006). Yet the modes and expressions of inter-cultural engagement evident among many members of diasporas certainly have much to teach us all, both in terms of social scientific understanding of the way culture works and in terms of practical living-with-difference.

Bibliography

Ang, I., J.E. Brand, G. Noble and D. Wilding (2002) *Living Diversity: Australia's Multicultural Future*, Artamon: Special Broadcasting Service Corporation

Appiah, K.A. (2006) *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, New York: Norton

Ballard, R. (1994) 'Introduction: The emergence of *Desh Pardesh*,' in *Desh Pardesh: The South Asian Presence in Britain*, R. Ballard (Ed.), London: C. Hurst, pp. 1-34

Beck, U. (2006) *The Cosmopolitan Vision*, Cambridge: Polity Press

Caglar, A. (1994) German Turks in Berlin: Migration and Their Quest for Social Mobility, Ph.D. Thesis, Anthropology, McGill University

Cheah, P. and B. Robbins (eds) (1998) *Cosmopolitics*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota

Hannerz (1990) 'Cosmopolitans and locals in world culture,' in *Global Culture*, M. Featherstone (Ed), London: Sage: pp. 237-251

------ (1996) *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places*, London: Routledge

Koehn, P. H. and J. N. Rosenau (2002) 'Transnational competence in an emerging epoch,' *International Studies Perspectives* 3: 105-27

Landau, L.B. and I.S.M. Haupt (2007) 'Tactical cosmopolitanism and idioms of belonging: Insertion and self-exclusion in Johannesburg,' Johannesburg: University of Witwaterstrand Forced Migration Studies Programme, Migration Studies Working Paper Series No. 32

Mau, S.J. Mewes and A. Zimmermann (2008) 'Cosmopolitan attitudes through transnational social practices?,' *Global Networks* 8(1): 1-24

Rampton, B. (1995) *Crossing: Language and Ethnicity among Adolescents*, London: Longman

Robbins, B. (1998) 'Introduction Part I: Actually existing cosmopolitanism,' in *Cosmopolitics*, P. Cheah and B. Robbins (eds), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 1-19

Schank, R.C. and R.P. Abelson (1977) *Scripts, Plans, Goals and Understanding: An Inquiry into Human Knowledge Structures*, Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum

Sökefeld, M. (2000) 'Religion or culture? Concepts of identity in the Alevi diaspora,' paper presented at Conference on 'Locality, Identity, Diaspora', University of Hamburg

Swidler, A. (1986) 'Culture in action: symbols and strategies,' *American Sociological Review* 51: 273-86

Vertovec, S. and R. Cohen (eds) (2003) *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context and Practice*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Vertovec, S. (2006) 'Diasporas good, diasporas bad,' *Metropolis World Bulletin*, Vol. 6

Werbner, P. (1999) 'Global pathways: Working class cosmopolitans and the creation of transnational ethnic worlds,' *Social Anthropology* 7(1): 17-35

Werbner, P. (Ed.) (2008) *Anthropology and the New Cosmopolitanism: Rooted, Feminist and Vernacular Perspectives*, Oxford: Berg