Contested Cosmopolitanism

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A growing body of literature is accumulating around theories of cosmopolitanism. The concept is hotly debated within a number of disciplines, and similar debates circulate beyond academia, among national and transnational actors. This paper aims to critically appraise some of the current competing discourses and agendas around cosmopolitanism and their implications.

The recent emphasis on cosmopolitanism is not without its detractors, and this paper engages with some of the key critiques of the current cosmopolitan turn. These touch on multiple dimensions of the cosmopolitan project, its essentialising and reductionist features, its western-centric bias and its post-colonial inflection. While some scholars mobilise the concept of cosmopolitics to contest the political nature of cosmopolitanism rhetoric and agenda, others historicise its political and economic context. Still others flesh out the figure of the cosmopolitan, offering alternative readings of the current postmodern condition, or undoing the cosmopolitan project from within.

Through an exploration of the discrepancies between competing accounts of cosmopolitanism, and of contested understandings of who can or cannot aspire to be considered ‘cosmopolitan’, the paper sets out to highlight the situatedness of specific political projects associated with cosmopolitanism and to discuss the ramifications of privileging specific views of cosmopolitanism over others.

Introduction

This paper argues that competing and contested claims are currently being made under the banner of cosmopolitanism, and that unpacking the situatedness of these disparate and conflicting claims matters. It matters because behind what at first glance might appear as a shared and unified call to embrace cosmopolitanism, different implications are entailed about what needs to be done, who needs to be doing it and why. Ultimately,
it matters because the benevolent and emancipatory discourse of cosmopolitanism may, as the paper sets out to illustrate, unwittingly or intentionally advance regressive and hegemonic projects.

The paper is articulated around a reflection on the re-emergence of the cosmopolitanism debate (the current “cosmopolitan moment” which is the focus of this analysis), followed by an unpacking of the competing definitions of cosmopolitanism and key agendas formulated (primarily, though not exclusively) within the social sciences. It then proceeds to engage with critiques of cosmopolitanism(s), and the figure of “the cosmopolitan”.

The re-emergence of Cosmopolitanism

Debates over cosmopolitanism have re-emerged and gained momentum (Vertovec and Cohen 2002; Delanty 2012). A growing body of literature is rapidly accumulating around theories of cosmopolitanism, and the concept is currently hotly debated within a number of disciplines, ranging from law, philosophy and anthropology to other social and political sciences (Delanty 2012; Latour 2004; Beck 2012; Fine and Cohen 2002; Lu 2000; Valentine 2008; Werbner 2008; Cheah 2006).

The reasons for its current revival merit some consideration, given that debates over cosmopolitanism have captured the imagination of a number of social and political theorists over the centuries. In the West these debates date back to antiquity with the Cynics and the Stoics, but have re-emerged with great intensity at different times, most notably during the Enlightenment. In emphasising the current cosmopolitan turn, some scholars seek to extend the traditional canon of cosmopolitanism by re-examining the work of authors previously not perceived to have engaged with theories of cosmopolitanism. In this vein, it has been argued (Turner 2006) that cosmopolitan concerns can be recovered in the work of various classical social theorists, including Durkheim (in his study of the moral consequences of a social global world), Giddens (his theory of globalisation), Weber (his methodology and its relation to an ethics of care), Marx (his political economy of international capitalism), Parsons (the work on international system of societies) and Habermas (his communicative theory of democracy), amongst others.

Other scholars prefer to highlight the discrete nature of cosmopolitan thought and seek to recover common features that recur within the discrete periods in which cosmopolitan concerns flourish. Fine and Cohen (2002) take four historical contexts
or ‘moments’ in which cosmopolitan ideas are debated – the ancient world, the Enlightenment, the period of the post-totalitarian/Nuremberg Trials period and a recent North American debate on patriotism – to tease out the reasons and anxieties behind the contemporary interest in cosmopolitanism. They link this interest to a desire to tackle a variety of issues and note that “while cosmopolitanism has many virtues it is unlikely to provide an all-embracing solution or a total antidote to the problems of extreme nationalism, racism, ethnic conflict and religious fundamentalism” (Fine and Cohen 2002, 137).

Vertovec and Cohen, instead, hypothesise that the present resurgence of interest might be understood as arising from a proposed new politics of the left, embodying middle-path alternatives between ethnocentric nationalism and particularistic multiculturalism (Vertovec and Cohen 2002, 1).

Most commonly, however, scholars see the current resurgence of cosmopolitanism as linked to various processes, including most notably the process of globalisation (Vertovec and Cohen 2002; Beck and Snaider 2006; Delanty 2006; Soysal 2010; Turner 2006). While some scholars explicitly seek to avoid conflating the two phenomena (Beck and Snaider 2006; Delanty 2006, 2012), they stress the large-scale and far-reaching effects of globalisation¹ – on transnational migration and flows, ‘global’ cities, the alleged demise of the nation-state – that have catalysed the current debate over cosmopolitanism.² These phenomena, though present before, are seen as having undergone a step change under the process of globalisation and as having become defining features of our time and of life in neoliberal post-industrial societies.

**Issues of definition**

The debate over cosmopolitanism highlights various modes of being, ways of thinking and enacting cosmopolitanism. As Beck and Snaider suggest “[c]osmopolitanism is ... a contested term; there is no uniform interpretation of it in the growing literature” (2006, 2).

In their edited book entitled *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism*, Vertovec and Cohen (2002, 9) map out the variety of interpretations and understandings of cosmopolitanism

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¹ Used here to refer to a compression of space and time, an uneven intensification of (economics and other) links, and an expansion of a capitalist world economy and ideology.

² Delanty for instance sees the relationship between cosmopolitanism and globalisation as one of tension, and cosmopolitanism as an implicit critique of globalisation (2012, 2).
that are circulating in the literature, and subsume these under six perspectives. This has become a prevalent taxonomy that continues to be widely referenced (Rovisco and Nowicka 2011, 2).

The first of these perspectives sees cosmopolitanism as a socio-cultural condition. Highlighting the rapid changes in transport, communications and tourism pattern, the rapid increase in flows of goods and people (including intensified migration flows), this view of cosmopolitanism celebrates the diversity produced, and challenges traditional paradigms based on ethnocentric, national and gendered views (Ibid., 9–10).

The second perspective sees cosmopolitanism as a kind of philosophy or worldview. This is the citizen-of-the-world philosophy, which can result in a variety of stances in relation to justice, including a commitment to universal rights and standards, a rejection of nationalism as parochial, an attempt to balance cosmopolitanism with patriotism, or to reject the national scale altogether (Ibid., 10–11).

Cosmopolitanism can then be understood to be a political project towards building transnational institutions. This view of cosmopolitanism is seen as promoting frameworks and institutions beyond the nation-state, such as the UN and the EU on one side, or social movements that are transnational, such as environmental movements (Ibid., 11–12).

Alternatively, cosmopolitanism can be seen as a political project for recognising multiple identities. This understanding of cosmopolitanism underpins the legitimacy of plural affiliations and the performance of various loyalties, as it acknowledges that individuals belong to various networks and are able to (simultaneously) embrace different identities (Ibid., 12–13). This is often evidenced by work on diasporic groups, although the claim holds more generally. Vertovec subsequently coined the term super-diversity to highlight that ‘significant new conjunctions and interactions of variables have arisen through patterns of immigration to the UK over the past decade’ which

3 Even as new critiques continue to refine the categories further, as discussed later on in the paper.
4 Although celebrated by some as overcoming these limitations, cosmopolitanism is seen by others as bringing its own biases, including a gender bias (Nava 2007; Vieten 2012; Nava 2002). The alleged demise of the national (Gilroy 2005) and the extent to which cosmopolitanism might overcome it is also questionable (Cheah 2006), as discussed later on in the paper.
5 Vertovec and Cohen claim that the work of Kaldor and Held can be read in this light, for instance, whereas that of Smith illustrates a take on cosmopolitanism as a project to build different types of transnational entities, such as social movements.
elude the way diversity is commonly articulated in policy, and in public and academic discourses (Vertovec 2007, 1025).  

The fifth perspective on cosmopolitanism identified by these scholars (Ibid., 13) refers to an attitudinal or dispositional orientation, and, as such, is a characteristic of the individual. This perspective sees cosmopolitanism as an outlook, as a mode of managing meaning and as an aesthetic and intellectual appreciation of (and even a desire for) diversity.  

Finally, the sixth perspective on cosmopolitanism conceives it as a mode of practice or competence (Ibid., 13–14), an ability to navigate different cultures and competently operate within different systems of meaning. Again, Vertovec and Cohen alert us to the danger of confusing cosmopolitanism with consumerist cosmopolitanism, “the massive transfer of foodstuffs, artworks, music, literature and fashion. Such processes represent a multiculturalization of society, but also the advanced globalization of capitalism” (Ibid., 14). Moreover, while intuitively appealing, the assumption that exposure to diversity may produce changes in attitude (in terms of greater openness, understanding, appreciation of difference) remains an untested assumption (Ibid., see also Valentine 2008, Yeoh and Lin 2012, Vertovec 2007).  

So a feature of the current debates on cosmopolitanism remains the lack of a unified vision of what cosmopolitanism might be and what it might entail (Delanty 2012). The common denominator, instead, is a celebration of cosmopolitanism as evident in some of the definitions above and the agendas described below (see also Yeoh and Lin 2012, Valentine 2008), and the belief that we are witnessing important step changes globally that demand the adoption of a cosmopolitan outlook and approach.

6 Country of origin, migration channel, legal status, human capital, access to employment, locality, transnationalism, the uneven responses of local authorities, service providers and local residents are all factors affecting these complex formations (Vertovec 2007, 1045), and the resulting alliances confound the ethnicity groupings used in policy and service provision.  

7 Running through the work of Waldron, Hannzer and Taguieff (Vertovec and Cohen 2002). Recent critical reformulations of this take – by Nava, Webner and Vieten – are discussed later on in the paper (pages 30–31 and footnotes 23 and 12, although see also pages 32 and 22).  

8 Valentine (2008)’s research shows that contact and small civilities in everyday encounters may not necessarily signal a respect for difference, nor a lack of (racial or other) prejudice or hostility. The civilities she studied did not amount to a convivial sociability (Gilroy 2005), nor indicated that diversity had become unremarkable. Vertovec stresses that “regular contact can entrench group animosities, fears and competition” (2007, 1045), while Yeoh and Lin (2012) critique the assumption that ‘cosmopolitan cities’, and urbanity more generally, foster cosmopolitanism.
Cosmopolitan agendas

In calling for the adoption of a cosmopolitan outlook strong programmatic claims are put forward. In 2006 Beck and Sznaider edited a special issue of *The British Journal of Sociology* that was dedicated to Cosmopolitan Sociology. In their opening paper entitled *Unpacking Cosmopolitanism for the Social Sciences: a Research Agenda* they “call for a re-conceptualization of the social sciences by asking for a cosmopolitan turn” (2006, 1). The same paper describes the scope of the changes envisaged:

> [a]t this point the humanities and social sciences need to get ready for a transformation of their own positions and conceptual equipment – that is, to take cosmopolitanism as a research agenda seriously and raise some of the key conceptual, methodological, empirical and normative issues that the cosmopolitanization of reality poses for the social sciences. (Beck and Sznaider 2006, 2)

The approach that they advocate is transdisciplinary and based on operating “a distinction between cosmopolitanism as a set of normative principles and (really existing) cosmopolitanization” (Ibid., 7). Through a focus on “the cosmopolitan condition of real people” (Ibid., 9), the authors conceive of cosmopolitanism as an heterogeneous set of lived practices, which can emerge as unintended, even as side-effects of other phenomena (see also Beck 2012, Rovisco and Nowicka 2011). Beck and Sznaider propose to set aside the moral and normative project of ideal cosmopolitanism, exemplified by the Enlightenment philosophy, and pursue instead an epistemic and analytical project (2006, 3) to develop a form of methodological cosmopolitanism:

> [n]ational spaces have become denationalized ... This entails a re-examination of the fundamental concepts of ‘modern society’. Household, family, class, social inequality, democracy, power, state, commerce, public, community, justice, law, history, memory and politics must be released from the fetters of methodological nationalism, re-conceptualized, and empirically established within the framework of a new cosmopolitan social and political science. (Beck and Sznaider 2006, 6)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, those who have never considered society as coinciding with national borders see the rejection of methodological nationalism at the core of this approach as nothing revolutionary:
Let me make clear from the beginning that I am not debating the usefulness of a cosmopolitan social science that, beyond the boundaries of nation-states, would try to look at global phenomena using new types of statistics and inquiries. I accept this point all the more readily since for me, society has never been the equivalent of nation-state (Latour 2004, 450).

Interestingly, in the new agenda for the social sciences that Beck and Sznaider envisage, the paradigm of risk and the risk society\(^9\) are promoted as the lenses through which we can explain the poignancy of the debate around cosmopolitanism, the reshaping of the role of state actors, and ultimately the reconfiguration of entire fields of enquiry (2006, 11). The fact that these authors are able to stake their claim on the theoretical framework for cosmopolitanism in the social sciences, together with the open challenges that this framework invites from other scholars of cosmopolitanism (see for instance Soysal 2010, Glick Schiller 2010), illustrates the extent to which the current debate over cosmopolitanism may still be seen as emergent and its agenda still in the making.

In the same special issue on Cosmopolitan Sociology, Delanty (2006) argues for a different and more sociological approach to cosmopolitanism. He too envisages a situated cosmopolitanism that is post-universalistic and that, while linking political and social dimensions, does not presuppose the existence of a single world culture (2006, 27). Delanty seeks to move away from moral cosmopolitanism, with its strong universalistic ethics and lack of sociological grounding, and critiques political conceptions of cosmopolitanism – both the strong version aspiring to transnational democracy, and the weak version focusing around citizenship.

To Delanty, cosmopolitanism needs to be more self-problematising, and more sensitive to the tensions between the global and the local, the universal and the particular. In arguing the case for a critical cosmopolitanism, Delanty does not see this as an alternative to previous social theory but conceives it as a “more reflexive kind of understanding” (Ibid., 42), in that it would require an analysis of cultural modes of mediation by which the social world is shaped and where the emphasis is on moments of world openness created out of the encounter of the local with the global. (Delanty 2006, 27)

\(^9\) Characterised by an increased interdependence and exposure to a range of global (economic, ecological, security and other) risks, and accompanied by allegedly weakened nation-states (Beck 2006).
Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Delanty's *cosmopolitan imagination* is his reflection on the potential to transform the present through recourse to an imagined future. As the author puts it, “the cosmopolitan imagination entails a view of society as an on-going process of self-constitution” (Ibid., 40). This notion of cosmopolitanism bears resemblance to the constructivist take favoured by Latour (2004) in his call for *Cosmopolitics* as a project of reflexive and wilful construction of a Cosmo, which will be discussed in the next section.

The transformative potential of cosmopolitanism remains central to determining an agenda for it. Beck and Sznaider prefer a focus on methodological cosmopolitanism and caution that

> [i]t is at least conceivable ... that the shift in outlook from methodological nationalism to methodological cosmopolitanism will gain acceptance. But this need not have any implications for the prospect for realizing cosmopolitan ideals in society and politics. (2006, 7)

Others however read their work as advancing a transformative agenda that goes far beyond the scholarly debate and practices of the social sciences (Soysal 2010). For Soysal the agenda for cosmopolitanism needs to deliver both a methodological (empirical and analytical) strategy and a commitment to a transformative project. Soysal reads Beck and Sznaider's agenda as heralding a renewed interest in critical theory:

> [t]he ‘surplus value’ of cosmopolitan turn is not so much in its guidance in practicing research ... The real surplus value of cosmopolitanism offered in Beck and Sznaider’s intervention is in its transformative ramifications. (2010, 7)

Glick Shiller, by contrast, takes Beck and Sznaider's stance as an illustration of the potential (its emphasis on politics of perspectives, for instance) and the limitations (its inadequate theorisation of power) that their agenda for cosmopolitanism has “for those who might desire to build a theory that can empower struggles for social justice” (Glick Schiller 2010, 417). Reflecting on their agenda, she concludes that

> [w]e need a concept of cosmopolitanism that deploys a critique of methodological nationalism to research and theorize conditions within which people come to recognize
injustice and its causes and build on situated subaltern difference to openness to all struggles against oppression (2010, 419).

Similarly, others highlight the need for a subaltern cosmopolitanism (Santos 2002, 460, see also Vieten 2012), that is of an oppositional variety, by and for the socially excluded.

As noted earlier, Vertovec and Cohen also hypothesise a political agenda for cosmopolitanism – to redress the misgivings of multicultural policies at least within the UK (Vertovec and Cohen 2002, Vertovec 2001). For these authors, cosmopolitanism bypasses the flaws of multicultural politics – including the essentialism of “minority cultures” and their communities, the reification of a “national culture” and the depoliticisation of cultural diversity. Vertovec and Cohen support Clifford's claim that

[i]n contrast to multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism is now increasingly invoked to avoid the pitfalls of essentialism or some kind of zero-sum, all-or-nothing understanding of identity issues within a nation-state framework (Clifford 1998, quoted in Vertovec and Cohen 2002, 3).

Notwithstanding the fact that the shortcomings of multiculturalism (see also Vertovec 2007) map perfectly onto those that some critics attribute to cosmopolitanism (widely criticised for its essentialism, its reproduction of rigid notions of culture and group belonging, the ‘normalisation’ of certain types of difference to the exclusion of others, as we discuss in the following sections), what is worth noting here is the aspiration to identify an agenda for cosmopolitanism that may bring about a more authentic recognition of difference in policy and politics.\(^\text{10}\)

Similarly, Fine and Cohen (2002, 161) point to the engagement that the current cosmopolitan agenda presupposes, suggesting that those who advocate cosmopolitan solutions can no longer escape the burden of social responsibility for their ideas ... to advocate, delimit and develop cosmopolitanism in the global age has become an urgent moral necessity.

\(^{10}\) Vertovec has introduced the term super-diversity to critique the limitations of previous understandings of diversity within multicultural policy and debate (particularly as constructed along ethnicity lines), highlighting instead the variety of factors (and their multi-layered interaction) that result in complex configurations and alternative alliances (see also discussion on page 6, and in footnote 6). The work on subaltern cosmopolitanism, for instance, and that on migrants and diasporic groups also supports this understanding of diversity and of the complex alliances forged.
Even when advocating a “non-idealistic, non-alienating, and non-coercive” cosmopolitanism (Lu 2000, 265), authors can struggle to reconcile the normative and analytical elements of the cosmopolitan project. In Lu’s work, for instance, this emerges strongly in the many attempts to delineate a correct interpretation of cosmopolitanism, and her paper is interspersed with caveats, such as “cosmopolitanism, rightly conceived” or “a cosmopolitan ethical perspective, rightly understood” (2000, 164–265). Again, this may indicate the malleability and relative ambiguity of notions of cosmopolitanism, and mark the debate about its agenda as still emergent, as different authors make different demands of cosmopolitanism and the agendas envisaged can vary greatly.

While the previous section presented competing definitions of cosmopolitanism, this section argued that the agendas mobilised also vary considerably. This is evident even when considering a sample of the agendas circulating within the social sciences, whose programmatic aspirations range from methodological change to addressing global and local injustices. What these divergent agendas share, as argued, is instead a celebration of cosmopolitanism, which pervades much of the literature. The enthusiasm for cosmopolitanism, however, is not without its detractors; the body of critical literature is large and growing. The next section will discuss some of the hegemonic processes that can be enacted through an apparently benign recourse to cosmopolitanism.

**Cosmopolitanism and its discontents**

The critiques mobilised against cosmopolitanism are heterogeneous and touch on multiple dimensions of the cosmopolitan project. In her paper entitled *The One and Many Faces of Cosmopolitanism* Lu (2000) provides an insightful overview of many of these critiques, as she attempts – and arguably fails – to refute them. The first criticism presented is directed at the idealism behind much cosmopolitan thought, and its clash with the realities of conflict and injustice experienced by many. Lu acknowledges that some notions of cosmopolitanism suffer from a utopian outlook and concedes that “ethical theories relying on a misplaced faith in human perfectibility or moral progress or natural harmony of interests are superficial and practically untenable” (Ibid., 247). Similarly, critiques of cosmopolitanism focusing on its rationalism highlight the abstraction, and possibly the hypocrisy, of a commitment to humanity at large, and of a cosmopolitanism that “does not adequately accommodate the human need to belong to

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11 The current cosmopolitanism debate has been unfolding since the nineties.
communities of meaning and purpose” (Ibid., 249, see also Appiah 2006, Nava 2007). Such criticism can also shed light on the alleged elitist, privileged and intellectual origin of at least some historical incarnations of cosmopolitan thought, which, as Boehm (1932, 458) puts it, “often exists amongst persons whom fortune has relieved from the immediate struggle for existence and from pressing social responsibility and who can afford to indulge their fads and enthusiasms” (quoted in Lu 2000, 250).

Another charge against cosmopolitanism is that it displays hegemonic tendencies and is imperialistic. In the words of Lu, cosmopolitanism has “a penchant for monism” (Ibid., 251), and as Latour notes,

whenever cosmopolitanism has been tried out, from Alexandria to the United Nations, it has been during the great periods of complete confidence in the ability of reason and, later, science to know the one cosmos whose existence and solid certainty could then prop up all efforts to build the world metropolis of which we are all too happy to be citizens. The problem we face now is that it’s precisely this “one cosmos,” what I call mononaturalism, that has disappeared. (2004, 453)

Whether extinct or not, such monoisms can demonstrate the coercion behind the apparently benign facade of cosmopolitanism, as they work to ensure others recognise and embrace the same vision of the world. Mignolo, reflecting on the imperialist drive running through notions of cosmopolitanism, illustrates this point with his description and critique of three historical cosmopolitan designs:

the Spanish empire and Portuguese colonialism (Vitoria); the British empire and French and German colonialism (Kant), and U.S. imperialism (human rights). All three cosmopolitan designs shall be seen not only as a chronological order but also as the synchronic coexistence of an enduring concern articulated first through Christianity as a planetary ideology, second around the nation-state and the law as grounds for the second

12 In contrast, Appiah (2006) argues for a rooted cosmopolitanism, and Nava for a visceral one based on empathy, emotions, the subconscious and an ‘attraction and identification with otherness’ (Nava 2007, 8).

13 For a critique of the intellectual stance, see Nava (2007).

14 As Gilroy put it, the risk may be that of circulating a wordly vision that is ‘simply one more imperialistic particularism dressed up in seductive universal garb’ (Gilroy 2005, 4). So the coercion consists in the imposition of planetary-scale visions, and all-encompassing (and totalising) value systems.
phase of colonialism, and third as the need to regulate the planetary conflict between democracy and socialism during the Cold War. (Mignolo 2000, 745)

Lu notes the easiness with which the ethical doctrine of cosmopolitanism can serve the interest of the powerful (2000, 252) and reiterates Carr’s warning that “order’ and ‘international solidarity’ will always be slogans of those who feel strong enough to impose them on others” (quoted in Lu 2000, 252).¹⁵ Latour takes the argument further, applying it directly to contemporary projects of cosmopolitanism, and specifically to Beck’s agenda. Once more, the face of cosmopolitanism appears deceptively benevolent, though the benevolence only masks an obstinate misunderstanding of the wide differences that separate people.¹⁶ As Latour argues, “Beck appears to believe in a UNESCO koine, a sociological Esperanto, that lies hidden behind stubborn defects, whether social or psychological, in our representations” (Latour 2004, 456).

In this paper entitled “Whose cosmos, which cosmopolitics?” which the scholar dialogically addresses to Beck, Latour claims that more than culture needs to be questioned, as in his view we are not merely disagreeing about different views of the same world (Ibid., 454). Instead, he intimates that “[w]e have to choose ... between cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitics” (Ibid., 453). Borrowing the term from Strengers,¹⁷ he uses it to capture the infinite number of entities and possible cosmos, and to highlight that a common world is a project to be achieved and negotiated with great effort, rather than something already existing out there and simply awaiting our (or more likely, other people’s) acknowledgement. In doing so, he complicates and politicises the debate over cosmopolitanism, by highlighting how other scholars can gloss over the issues of whose cosmos is, and hence whose values are, being promoted.

The western-centric bias that cosmopolitanism can display, as highlighted in some of these critiques, can operate on different levels – ranging from more hegemonic macro-level biases (Cheah 1998, as discussed below) to the level of the individual, in terms of the characterisation of the person or type who is constructed as being cosmopolitan (discussed in the next section).

Cheah (1998) too uses the term cosmopolitics to politicise and historicise the economic contexts within which cosmopolitan rhetoric and programmes were previously developed

¹⁵ Carr, E. (1946, 87).
¹⁶ As Santos noted ‘a cosmopolitanism without adjectives denies its own particularity’ (2002, 460).
and are currently enjoying a revival. Cheah approaches cosmopolitanism through a critique of capitalism. Although the author argues that ideas of cosmopolitanism can be thought of as historically preceding nationalism, and as in opposition to statism rather than nationalism, it is capitalism, in his view, that is seen as creating the optimal conditions for the existence of both nationalism and cosmopolitanism. The opposition between the two is therefore problematised, and the author claims that such contentious opposition is even more dubious today, with the concept of the nation being so volatile.  

Current versions of cosmopolitanism are viewed by Cheah as the expressions of current hegemonic aims. The very promotion of international regulatory bodies and transnational organisations, frameworks and networks (from the UN to NGOs), which for some constitutes part of the humanitarian project of cosmopolitanism is seen by Cheah as extensions of specific interests. For Cheah,

the staging of an international civic society of elite nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) at UN World Conferences can become an alibi for economic transnationalism, which is often US economic nationalism in disguise. (1998, 31)

More importantly, Cheah (2006) strongly critiques the celebratory emergence of cosmopolitanism, on the grounds that it conceals, and deflects from, an altogether different set of questions about power. By taking a governementality angle (Foucault 1991), Cheah discredits the celebration of transnationalism for its supposed freeing of individuals from the constraints of the national framework, and instead presents both cosmopolitanism and transnationalism as simply changing the form, not the nature, of the technologies of governance to which individuals are subject. He argues that

one should think of cosmopolitanism as grounded in an even deeper set of material processes: the globalization of biopolitical technologies of governmentality. The new cosmopolitanism is often associated with human rights. We have witnessed the increasing proliferation of human rights instruments and also NGOs advocating for human rights, and engaging in humanitarian activities. ... But what we have learned from Foucault is that civil society is not necessarily a space of autonomy in relation to the state. It is an

18 While a cursory look at border security can dispel claims that the nation-state is in demise, the constructs of national identity and nationalism, while slippery and constantly undergoing reformulations, are certainly not extinct, as Gilroy (2005) reminds us.

19 Neither the national nor the alleged 'post-national' state are unproblematic. See footnote 17 above.
object that is produced by technologies of government. One of the primary avenues of the globalization of technologies of government is the discourse of development. (Cheah 2011)

With his sharp analysis of the implication of cosmopolitanism in the smooth functioning of a political bioeconomy, Cheah’s work is diametrically opposed to that of Beck and other theorists and proponents of Cosmopolitanism (Vertovec and Cohen 2002; Glick Schiller 2010; Lu 2000; Waldron 2000), including those who claim a relatively more critical stance in their enthusiastic celebration of cosmopolitanism (Delanty 2006; Soysal 2010).

This section analysed key critiques addressed to the cosmopolitan project in order to draw attention to the problematic processes that can be enacted under the banner of cosmopolitanism. The next section will argue that the figure of the cosmopolitan too is problematic and will unpack related assumptions about who can or cannot be described as cosmopolitan.

**Who are the cosmopolitans?**

An issue closely connected to the definition of what constitutes cosmopolitanism(s) and what its agenda(s) ought to be is that of describing the figure of the cosmopolitan (Nava 2002; Waldron 2000; Vertovec and Cohen 2002; Favell 2003; Werbner 1999; Szerszynski and Urry 2006; Skinner 2010 re-issue). Indeed, much of the critique and scepticism about the resurgence of cosmopolitanism centres on the characterisation of the cosmopolitan(s).

Vertovec and Cohen approach the issue by premising that “those who practice cosmopolitanism ... may not always be the same as those who preach it” and that they may be different (still) from “those who are labelled as ‘cosmopolitans’” (2002, 5).

It could be claimed that historically the figure of the cosmopolitan has inspired both emulation and hatred (Ibid.). As Vertovec and Cohen remind us, sometimes the very ideas of cosmopolitanism were promoted by figures that were considered outsiders and non-citizens, including some of the earlier advocates of cosmopolitanism in ancient Greece. Equally, from an historic perspective, it was mainly a wealthy elite who could travel for leisure and engage in learning languages and appreciating new cultures (2002, 5). Even then, the figure of the rootless cosmopolitan, without allegiances and strong (geographical and political) ties evoked complex feelings and often generated
suspicion. Aside from this elite of wealthy travellers, the figure of the Jew and the Gipsy also exemplify the historic resistance and suspicion that manifested itself towards those perceived as not possessing strong ties to a specific territoriality and (national) customs (Vertovec and Cohen 2002, 6).

Vertovec and Cohen suggest that a commonly circulating and stereotyped view of cosmopolitans mostly considers them to be “privileged, bourgeois ... wealthy jet setters, corporate managers, intergovernmental bureaucrats, artists, tax dodgers, academics and intellectuals” (2002, 7). Paradoxically, this globe-trotting class of “cosmocrats” are characterised by their homogeneity, and Vertovec and Cohen suggest, along with Monaci et al., that

such financial experts, corporate personnel and the like embody a bounded and elitist version of cosmopolitanism, marked by a specialized and – paradoxically – rather homogenous transnational culture, a limited interest in engaging ‘the Other’, and a rather restricted corridor of physical movement between defined spaces in global cities. (Monaci et al. 2001 in Vertovec and Cohen 2002, 7)

This critique of “cosmopolitan elites”, refutes cosmopolitanism’s claim that it produces a deep sensitivity, curiosity and acceptance of diversity and the “other”. The only encounters with diversity that are sought by these “cosmopolitans” are superficial and involve domesticated, easily digestible and ‘safe’ versions of the different or exotic.21

Viewing the cosmopolitan as pursuing a certain form of aesthetics also leads us to reflect on notions of taste and difference (Bourdieu 1984). It also brings us back to the possible existence of a cosmopolitan elite – whether conceived as a set of globe-trotting cosmocrats or as the transnational elite described by, for instance, Sklair (2001) – and immediately it brings to the fore issues of class and social stratification. As Bourdieu suggests,

taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar. (1984, 6)

21 As discussed also in the urban studies literature on cosmopolitanism (see Young, Diep, and Drabble 2006; Yeoh and Lin 2012).
Hence the pursuit of lifestyles and activities that are seen by some as cosmopolitan, including consumption of travel and performance of high mobility, can also operate as performing social differentiation through the exercise of taste – specifically, taste for ‘the exotic’ or ‘the other’.

It is in the context of the prevailing discourses about high mobility and the fluxes of ‘elite migrants’ across countries and global cities that Favell questions the extent to which cosmopolitans thus constituted actually exist. The scholar takes

a skeptical look at just how possible it is to live out the ultra-mobile global or transnational family lives predicated for these people, who are wrongly classed as ‘elites’ (Favell 2003, 2)

and sets out to investigate how Europe’s leading ultra-mobile global or transnational families live. In a paper entitled *Eurostar and Eurocities: Towards a Sociology of Free Moving Professionals in Western Europe* he presents the findings of a qualitative study looking at Brussels in relation to experiences of Europeanization and barriers to free movement. Favell’s frustration is apparent as he asks

who exactly are the übermenschen predicated by these theorists? Do these people who populate the niche marketing of in-flight magazines and global hotel chains really exist or live out real lives? ... it is amazing that globalization theorists have been able to get away with their sweeping generalizations about the effortless mobility of highly educated professional ‘elites’. (Favell 2003, 10–11)

The author argues that beyond the normative push towards the emergence of a European citizenship, there is limited evidence of a real Europeanization, which appears confined to sport, tourism and cuisine, as well as to the cross-border activities of some regions (Ibid., 17). In contrast his research highlights the entitlements and benefits of a nationally rooted lifestyle that these movers have had to give up. The movers, Favell claims, have not turned into the rootless figures described in much literature, but experience instead varying levels of investment, identification or lingering displacement and dislocation in Brussels.

Despite Favell’s attempt to demystify the image of the cosmopolitan as a member of an elite, other characterisations of the cosmopolitan reinforce that image. Waldron (2000) celebrated the cosmopolitan as an individual who dabbles in various cultures and who does not take
identity as anything definitive, as something homogeneous that might be muddied or compromised when he studied Greek, ate Chinese, wore clothes made in Korea, worshipped with the Book of the Common Prayer, listened to arias by Verdi sung by a Maori diva on Japanese equipment, gave lectures in Buenos Aires, followed Israeli politics, or practiced Buddhist meditation techniques. (Waldron 2000, 227–228)

Again the cosmopolitan is characterised as **rootless**, individualistic and footloose, and it is perhaps in response to the criticism of this characterisation of the cosmopolitan that some of the most recent literature emphasises “the cosmopolitan condition of real people” (Beck and Sznaider 2006, 9; Rovisco and Nowicka 2011). This approach is based on (and yet is also developed as a critique to) Hannerz’s characterisation of the cosmopolitan as someone possessing “an orientation and a willingness to engage with the Other” (Hannerz 1990, 239) and seeking an “intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness towards divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrasts rather than uniformity” (Ibid., 239). Whilst this literature appears to privilege the **ordinary and everyday** expressions of cosmopolitanism, or to praise cosmopolitanism as a benevolent inclination rather than a position of detachment and rootlessness, it has been criticised for its intellectual detachment by authors who advocate a more emotionally engaged and rooted approach (Nava 2007; Appiah 2006).

The dichotomy between cosmopolitan and non cosmopolitan can be seen as further exposing the **elitist** characterisation of the cosmopolitan, as well as its gender and other biases (Nava 2002; 2007; Vieten 2012). Hannerz, in the earlier work quoted above, is adamant for instance that tourists, exiles and refugees (with some exceptions), and the transnational class compelled by their work to travel and live abroad are not to be thought of as cosmopolitans, nor are other traders and smugglers, and his list of those excluded from this category appears to extend even further with the addition of low-paid migrant workers too.

Defining the cosmopolitan thus implies identifying those who are not (or are seen as not) being cosmopolitan. These categorisations are challenged and exposed for

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22 Kymlicka suggested that this is simply “enjoying the opportunities provided by the diverse societal culture that characterises the Anglophone society of the United States” and ought not to be considered cosmopolitan (Kymlicka 1995, 85, quoted in Waldron 2000, 228).

23 While Nava comments on Hannerz’s characterisation of the cosmopolitan as a man (2002, 2007),Vietien argues more generally that cosmopolitanism is gender biased, like nationalism, and that its more recent academic debate is unfolding mainly as a male business (2012).
bringing their own bias, as well as an element of class blindness that again ends up further tarnishing the cosmopolitan project with elitism. Werbner for instance claims that

[o]ddly, ... Hannerz lumps together migrant settlers, exiles or refugees, the formative makers of diasporas, with tourists ... Implicit in this separation of professional-occupational transnational cultures from migrant or refugee transnational cultures is, I propose, a hidden Eurocentric and class bias: transnational cultures are most often centred on the North and manned by high status professionals. ... for Hannerz, instead of a willingness to 'engage with the Other', diasporics are reluctant to step outside a 'surrogate home'. (1999, 17)

Werbner sets off to demonstrate the existence of working-class cosmopolitans using her ethnographic work with Pakistani migrant workers in the Gulf (Werbner 2008; Werbner 1999) and argues that “even working class labour migrants may become cosmopolitans, willing to ‘engage with the Other’” (1999, 18). But what remains untouched throughout the discussion is the dichotomy between cosmopolitan and non-cosmopolitan, although different authors fill the two positions with different groups of people. Indeed, the two categories become interdependent because the very existence of the diversity that the cosmopolitans strive for is predicated on the existence of non-cosmopolitans:

for the cosmopolitans ... there is value in diversity as such, but they are not likely to get it, in anything like the present form, unless other people are allowed to carve out special niches for their cultures, and keep them. Which is to say that there can be no cosmopolitans without locals. (Hannerz 1990, 250)

Although recent contributions to the cosmopolitan debate strive to focus on cosmopolitanism from below, or even to abandon this problematic dichotomy and describe cosmopolitanism as a more pervasive phenomenon (Rovisco and Nowicka 2011, 5–6), these categories and the definitions of who occupies them remain central to current debates. The only theorisations able to transcend the divide between elites and non-elites, this paper argues, and that more generally extend the category of the cosmopolitan widely across the board, are those which treat cosmopolitanism as a cultural phenomenon:
The growth in the number and reach of global connoisseurs, elite or not, ... is linked to John Urry's (1995) notion of 'aesthetic cosmopolitanism'. Not only elites, but also tourists of all kinds have developed more cosmopolitan or far-reaching aesthetic tastes. This can be directly linked with (as both driving force and outcome of) the enhanced popular trend over the past few decades towards the 'consumption' of foreign places. ... It is a trend arguably based on exoticism, commodification and consumer culture. ... Aesthetic cosmopolitanism can be found at home, too, through other forms of consumption. (Vertovec and Cohen 2002, 7)

However, within this framework the cosmopolitan is likely to lack the deep sensitivity and commitment to engagement with 'the other' highlighted by Hannerz (see above), and even more so the visceral cosmopolitanism described by Nava (2007), and for that very reason 'aesthetic cosmopolitanism' is often dubbed in the literature as 'banal cosmopolitanism'.

Similarly, Giddens's (1991) notion of the primacy of lifestyle in the trajectory of the self, and the role of our spare time activities in defining who we are, are also interesting lenses through which to peer at cosmopolitanism as a pervasive condition. Skinner (2010), in his paper on Work/Leisure Balances and the Creation of a Carnival Cosmopolitanism amongst Salsa Dancers sees elements such as food, tourism, music, literature, clothes and dance in this light, as self-ascribing ways of creating and maintaining associations. He argues that food, tourism, music, literature and clothes – to which I would add dancing, ... are the ways of styling the self, of how people ‘transform themselves into singular beings, to make their lives into an oeuvre’ (Nuttall 2004: 432). This lifestyle accessorisation, whether ‘Afro-Chic’ designer clothing worn in the townships of South Africa, holiday experiences ‘souvenired’, salsa groove record recordings taken in Cali (Waxer 2002), Columbia, or dance trends in Dublin and Belfast, are all self-ascribing ways of creating and maintaining associations, groupings and interrelations. Dancing salsa is also, so we shall see, a way of self-making and cosmopolitan creating as the body self. (Ibid., 12)

Skinner agrees with Calhoun that these activities remain the “easy faces of cosmopolitanism” (Calhoun 2002, 105 in Ibid., 12) and concedes that, ‘Consumerist cosmopolitanism’ does not equate to a tolerant cosmopolis. It is an ‘easy’ cosmopolitanism then, of items rather than identifications. (Ibid., 12)
Interestingly, Skinner also suggests that his interviewees may also pursue these cosmopolitan activities as forms of (temporary) escapism, as an answer to social alienation (Skinner 2010, 20).

In contrast, these activities can be theorised from a governmentality angle in quite different terms. This paper has argued that, behind a most benevolent facade, a call for cosmopolitanism can often enact hegemonic processes – Cheah eloquently demonstrated (1998; 2001, 2006) how this can take place at the macro level, through the creation of transnational institutions, NGOs and movements. At the individual level certain cosmopolitan pursuits can diffuse as mass cultural practices, and can also be theorised as technologies of freedom:

Rose (1992) argued that central to contemporary strategies for governing the soul was the creation of freedom. Subjects were obliged to be free and were required to conduct themselves responsibly, to account for their own lives and their vicissitudes in terms of their freedom. Freedom was not opposed to government. On the contrary, freedom, as choice, autonomy, self-responsibility, and the obligation to maximize one’s life as a kind of enterprise, was one of the principal strategies of what Rose termed advanced liberal government ... the very ethic of freedom was itself part of a particular formula for governing free societies. (Rose, O’Malley, and Valverde 2006, 91).

This offers a different view of taste, self-styling and self-actualisation through certain (cosmopolitan or other) pursuits, although there are interesting overlaps with the theories of consumption and of taste that see life-style and leisure activities as self-defining and constitutive of identity and social differentiation. Everyday cosmopolitan practices (and tastes) are still seen as ways of self-realisation or self-styling, but again, rather than indicating a more progressive, humane and meaningful relationship with ‘the other’ and with ‘diversity’, they represent a way of navigating a more hybrid and hyper-mobile type of everyday life, and of aligning our ‘self’ with new trends that are culturally dominant or perceived as desirable (for instance the trend for ultra-mobility, or to become culturally ‘omnivorous’).24

If we combine these cultural and governmentality approaches with a view of the cosmopolitan through the lens of a changing conceptualisation of visibility and mobility

24 From a governmentality angle culture is seen “as a set of technologies for governing habits, morals, and ethics – for governing subjects” (Rose, O’Malley, and Valverde 2006, 97).
– where mobility entails much more than physical mobility alone and is a much more diffuse experience, not confined to jet-setting elites – we may be able to ask interesting questions about the effects of cosmopolitanism.

In their 2006 paper entitled *Visuality, Mobility and the Cosmopolitan: Inhabiting the World from Afar*, Urry and Szerszynski define the cosmopolitan as someone possessing (all or a mix of) the following attributes – extensive mobility, capacity to consume, curiosity, willingness to take risks, ability to map one’s own society/culture and reflexivity, semiotic skills to interpret the images of others, openness to others and willingness/ability to appreciate certain elements of the language or culture of others (2006, 114–115).

Because of their emphasis on the existence of multiple mobilities (physical, imaginative and virtual travel), their take on cosmopolitanism reflects the ways in which these multiple mobilities come to engender an awareness of the extraordinary, a blurring of the distinction between what is present and what is absent, and a sense of fluid interdependence. As a consequence, it may be hypothesised that one of the more subtle but highly significant implications of the cosmopolitan condition is the way that growing numbers of humans might now be said to ‘inhabit’ their world at a distance. (Szerszynski and Urry 2006, 117)

Taking up Sach’s suggestion, they argue that a kind of alienation might result from some forms of cosmopolitanism, as people are increasingly accessing the world from afar:

perhaps the ‘cosmopolitan moment’ represents the completion of the process that started at the time of Wordsworth. Places have turned into a collection of abstract characteristics in a mobile world, ever easier to be visited, appreciated and compared, but not known from within. If our destiny is to become cosmopolitan, perhaps it is also to find pleasure in place only through an unrelenting visual economy of signs. (Szerszynski and Urry 2006, 127)

There are, therefore, productive convergences amongst these three interesting theoretical takes on cosmopolitanism – focusing on taste and consumption, on

25 The scholars are also adamant that (real) cosmopolitanisation may also entail unprogressive features, or exacerbate existing inequalities (Ibid., 115).
governmentality and technologies of the self, and on mobilities and visibilities respectively. These approaches see cosmopolitanism as a cultural phenomenon and diffuse the category of the cosmopolitan exponentially, but they also dismiss the most empathic and humanitarian agendas for cosmopolitanism.

As this section has argued, competing claims are still being made about who is and who is not seen as cosmopolitan. Some of the proponents of cosmopolitanism (for instance Nava 2002; Vieten 2012; Werbner 2008; Werbner 1999; Appiah 2006; Nava 2007) have recently tried to extend the category, in order to make it also more sensitive to gender, class and post-colonial sensibilities, to root it in personal experience, in emotions and even in the subconscious. However, none of these approaches has so far prevailed, and the deep emotional empathy and the commitment to social justice required by some of the new definitions of the cosmopolitan illustrate the difficulty in diffusing the concept widely. The only credible attempt at significantly diffusing the category is offered by those who theorise cosmopolitanism as a cultural phenomenon. This has important implications for the agendas pursued.

Conclusions

This paper has presented an overview and critical appraisal of some of the key current debates accompanying the resurgence of cosmopolitanism. It demonstrated the heterogeneity of thought, criticism and controversy that characterise these debates. It has discussed possible drivers of the current ‘cosmopolitan moment’ and the different guises under which cosmopolitanism is theorised.

The agendas of some of the key proponents of cosmopolitanism today, particularly in the social sciences and sociology, while pervaded by enthusiasm and charged with a sense of purpose, emerge as fragmentary and contentious. Far from being a unified push held together across disciplines and with common intent, a variety of situated and divergent political projects lie behind the calls to embrace cosmopolitanism.

While appraising old and new critiques of cosmopolitanism and representations of the figure of the cosmopolitan, the paper suggested that the current interest in cosmopolitanism can be best interpreted in terms of theories of taste and class differentiation, of self-styling and life trajectories, of governmentality and of multiple mobilities.

The paper has also argued that an approach to cosmopolitanism based on governmentality and an understanding of cosmopolitanism as a cultural (and aesthetic)
phenomenon might be a more productive (although less benevolent) lens through which to conceptualise processes enacted at the macro-scale, and those experienced and enacted at the micro-scale of everyday practices, and geared towards making and sustaining identity. Such a lens would certainly temper the optimism that imbues many calls for cosmopolitanism by prompting some sobering reflections on its wide-ranging effects.

To see cosmopolitanism through such a lens reveals that, despite the benevolent rhetoric, hegemonic processes are taking place at the macro scale, and the embracing of a cosmopolitan identity and outlook at the micro-scale may in fact often represent an alignment with current dominant cultural trends and values, rather than the affirmation of a personal liberation from regressive constraints and a strong commitment to social justice globally.

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