

Cosmopolitan Issues: Knowledge and Mobilities in a World of Borders – Panel Introduction

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Twenty years ago cosmopolitanism was new. At least there was a circulation of claims that cosmopolitanism had assumed new and different forms from its ancient and Enlightenment precedents. Beginning with Paul Rabinow’s (1986) call for a ‘critical cosmopolitanism’, these claims began to escalate as a host of qualifying adjectives rapidly attached themselves to the term: Benita Parry’s (1991) ‘postcolonial cosmopolitanism’, Mitchell Cohen’s (1992) ‘rooted cosmopolitanism’, James Clifford’s (1992) ‘discrepant cosmopolitanisms’, Bruce Robbin’s (1993) ‘comparative cosmopolitanisms’ and Homi Bhabha’s (1996) ‘vernacular cosmopolitanism’. This efflorescence of ‘new cosmopolitanism’ had many purposes and we need to rehearse these to consider how it has moved on:

- An attempt to resolve problems in liberal political thought without recourse to universalisms;
- A means of taking stock of cultural diversity in an increasingly globalised world;
- A method for undoing ethnographic practices that assumed the local shackling of the ‘native’;
- A way of describing the mutating relations between the nation, the state and capital;
- A critical means of cutting across discourses and practices of human rights and international law;
- An attempt to confront the weakening status of secularism before various movements of faith and affect.

The early 1990s was a heady moment when the market economy seemed to be breaking free from the constraints of territory and, for some, the dialectic between labour and capital seemed to be dissipating. Arguments for the ‘new cosmopolitanism’ were theoretically hitched to notions such as the space of flows, the global/local nexus, post-nationalism, imag-

ined communities, alternative modernities and the borderless world. Perhaps some conference participants here today still conduct their empirical investigations within this conceptual matrix. But it is the gambit of this panel that the conjuncture has moved on.

This is not to claim that we live in a world of resurgent nation-states. Nor is it to suggest that images of disjunction, hybridity and complexity have given way to some kind of new order, whether we label it neoliberalism, the '9/11 decade', the anthropocene, commonwealth, or the era of India and China's rise. Perhaps one way to chart the drift of the debate on cosmopolitanism is to say that there is now greater attention to operations as opposed to representations of the global. The proliferation of concepts such as assemblage, infrastructure, mobilities, standardization, connectivity and contagion is an index of this shift. We tend ever more to think of the global as an effect of particular, fragmented and material operations. Finance, science, political norms, advertisement, music, tourism or migration: each of these domains depends for its global reach on specific forms of connectivity. Each of these forms of connectivity is linked to different materialities or media: information technology, documentation, transportation or architecture. There is a burgeoning interest in the different kinds of logistical calculations, translations, citations, affective imitations and knowledge practices that govern the ways in which global operations link up the contemporary world.

At the same time there is a realization that global processes have led not to a diminution but rather to a proliferation of borders. Far from the image of a borderless world we live in a time of new enclosures and differential inclusions. No longer metaphysical lines defining the edge of territories, borders now cut through the middle of political spaces, marking out different kinds of urban limits, holding zones and funnel necks. As studies of the European migration regime or Australia's 'Pacific Solution' have shown, they have also been increasingly externalized or pushed beyond the official frontiers of continental space. Borders are no longer marginal but central to contemporary cultural, political, economic and social processes. This is not merely because they have the capacity to block or obstruct mobilities. Borders always have two sides. They connect as well as divide.

What does this have to do with the social force of cosmopolitanism? This is a question that the panellists today handle in different ways, touching down in different parts of the world, each with a particularly anxious resonance for contemporary Europe: on the one hand, China, and on the other hand, Greece. If China has emerged as an economic power that shifts the balance of the world away from the North Atlantic axis, Greece is wracked by sovereign debt. China and Greece are nations that sit at opposite poles of the current economic transition, and needless to say there are links, such as China's investment in the Greek ports and logistics sector. The possibilities and prospects for cosmopolitanism in both these sites look very different from the new cosmopolitan prognoses of the 1990s.

John Urry discusses how a distinctive cosmopolitanism crosses with a strong cultural nationalism for Chinese scientific elites who seek to create low-carbon innovations. While Alexandra Zavos asks how the deepening economic crisis in one of Europe's principle borderlands induces a deep crisis of politics and sovereignty. The speakers come to quite different (but related) conclusions about the purchase of cosmopolitanism on the contemporary global conjuncture. But perhaps this is precisely the point. Since if we are to continue to conduct cultural and social analysis under the sign of cosmopolitanism we need to ask how it crosses the political and economic processes that make the contemporary world.

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