

# **Cosmoscapes and the promotion of uncosmopolitan values**

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## **Cosmoscapes and the promotion of uncosmopolitan values**

Globality generates increasingly diffuse networks of human and non-human innovators, carriers and icons of exotic, polyethnic cosmopolitan difference; and this diffusion is increasingly hard to ignore or police (Latour 1993). In fact, such global networks of material-symbolic exchange can frequently have the unintended consequence of promoting status systems and cultural relationships founded on *uncosmopolitan* values such as cultural appropriation and status-based social exclusion. Moreover, this material-symbolic engagement with cosmopolitan difference could also be rather mundane, engaged in routinely without any great reflexive consciousness or capacity to destabilise current relations of cultural power, or interpreted unproblematically as just one component of a person's social environment. Indeed, Beck's (2006) argument is that cosmopolitanism, in an age of global risk, is being forced upon us unwillingly, so there should be no surprise if it is a bitter pill for some to swallow. Within these emergent cosmopolitan networks, which we call 'cosmoscapes', there is no certainty about the development of ethical or behavioural stances consistent with claims foundational to the current literature on cosmopolitanism. Reviewing historical and contemporary studies of globality and its dynamic generative capacity, this paper considers such literatures in the context of studies of cultural consumption and social status. When one positions these diverse bodies of literature against one another, it becomes clear that the possibility of widespread cosmopolitan cultural formations is largely unpromising.

### **Cosmoscapes and commodity networks**

There is an apparent confluence between global networks of capitalist exchange and the growth of cosmopolitan habits in a range of everyday fields. On the demand side, shifting and ever more complex status systems, fluid forms of identity which increasingly embrace cultural difference and the search for novelty in consumption habits all point to continued demand for cosmopolitan goods. On the supply side, producers are increasingly aware that cultural difference, exoticism and novelty offer powerful framing devices for goods in globally networked markets. The sourcing of objectified cosmopolitan difference by consumers becomes a means of social differentiation/ status acquisition and is driven by cultural appropriation. These cultural meanings inevitably become fused with the economic process of global expansion to form a 'cosmoscape' – which we define as spaces, practices, objects and images which afford and construct networks within which cosmopolitan engagements may be possible.

What circulates and what performs cosmopolitanness in this global symbolic economy? Appadurai's work (1990; 1996) specifies the broad rhetorics of literatures on economic globalisation, and suggests a cultural basis for the exchange of material goods. In elaborating a cultural specification of Marxian theories of the commodity, Appadurai (1990) defines a commodity as anything that is *exchanged*. Taking a processual view of commodity exchange, he focuses on objects as they go into and out of their commodity status: objects are 'candidates' (1996: 13) for being commodities, but do not remain simply and forever 'in' or 'out' of a commodity status. Objects cycle through circuits of

exchange; they are susceptible to paths and diversions (1990: 16) as they transfer through hands; they become visible and viewed; and they cross borders. Such movements subject cultural objects to continuous shifts of definition and meaning as they go across and within unique cultural systems. As a result, we can say that objects which flow through societies via commodity exchange are really no longer simple 'commodities' at all, but objectified containers of meaning amenable to reconstruction and reinterpretation by groups. The recursive relationship of meanings and materials is not simply 'background', but the phenomenon of cosmopolitanism itself.

Building on his analyses of object processes and cultural meaning, Appadurai (1996) broadened his theoretical vision beyond commodity and exchange systems to suggest that the global economy is constituted by a number of interrelated and overlapping dimensions founded on a series of networked 'scapes'. Appadurai's contention is that we live in a 'global *cultural* economy'. The 'economy' is not something that can be extricated from cultural movements and flows (specifically, electronic media and migration). Nor can the global economy be separated from the work of representation and imagination which constructs a field for actors to make their actions meaningful in a global context. Global 'mediascapes' present and disseminate information, but the importance of these media is not just in creating 'consumable' forms of entertainment or information, but in providing the cultural material necessary for the *imagining* of globality and a capacity to facilitate flows, movement and exchange.

Alexander (2006a, 2006b), writing on the idea of global civil society, takes a similar approach to Appadurai, arguing globalisation is as much a collective representation – an imaginary sphere, or a moment when a society communicates with itself – as it is a factual, materialist one. He theorises the civil sphere as a plurality of institutional, discursive, symbolic structures that guide styles of communication and obligation amongst its members. While recognising that the nascent global sphere is relatively undeveloped in a formal, institutional way, Alexander (2006b) notes the robustly communicative elements of the global civil sphere. Likewise, Szerszynski and Urry (2006) usefully emphasise the visual, ocular nature of globality in creating a field of cosmopolitanism. Global cultural difference must be sighted in various ways (e.g. symbols of ‘us’, ‘not us’, ‘all of us’) and in turn imagined through symbols and visual media. They also point to the role of globally reported iconic events and media spectacles which help to present cultural difference, while at the same time fostering a sense of global identification and belonging. Citing Anderson’s (1983) work on collective belonging, they suggest that post-national identifications of global citizenship can be fostered through the global imagery and narratives found in diverse media. Such representations point to the ways people can empathise with or become curious about culturally different experiences.

Equally, music can foster and afford cosmopolitan outlooks. Ross (2007) shows that cross-cultural forms and styles have been central to the development of the western musical canon. Classical music, he argues, changes its meaning as it traverses the globe, suggesting the cosmopolitanisation of accepted styles:

‘[I]t now connotes any ancient practice that has persisted into the modern era – the ritual opera of China, the imperial court music of Japanese *gagaku*, the *radif* or “order” of Persian melodies, the great classical traditions of India, and the polyrhythmic drumming of West African tribes... All this activity renews the folkish projects of Bartók, Janáček, the young Stravinsky, and de Falla – the quest for the real, the “dance of the earth” ’ (2007: 519).

In the field of popular contemporary music, Regev (2007) argues that there is a relational property to the global consumption and production of music, such that a taste for cultural otherness in turns creates demands for such differences, promoting a mix-up of styles, practices and influences. Cultural elements from alien cultures are thus inserted, integrated and absorbed in to the producer’s own ethno-national culture. Consequently, consumers of home-made cultural products and art works become inadvertently open to experiences from other ethno-national cultures (Regev 2007: 126). Such a process inevitably leads to the mixing of styles of production and consumption, to an increasingly irrelevance or even erasure of national styles. This sonic and visual cultural production, insofar as it affords ideas of trans-national interconnectedness, can assist in the development of cosmopolitan viewpoints. At least, it can possibly represent new ways of being the cultural other, or – through the pleasurable practices of listening or dancing - engender a new respect for other cultures.

But we also need to treat such claims with a degree of reflexivity and have due regard for questions of the everyday reception and use of such imagery and objects. The frequent assumption in these bodies of literature is that the circulation of such imagery is almost at saturation point and further, that they signal the same thing to everyone and have direct, calculable implications for outlooks and behaviours. This is clearly not the case, as numerous empirical studies have shown. A number of issues need to be considered. First, such an approach overlooks the possibility of moral indifference to these forms of cosmopolitan representation (Stevenson 2003: 116). Stevenson (2003) summarises these debates effectively, pointing to Tester's (1995, 1999) argument that the world awash with sounds and images from 'elsewhere' actually creates a blasé attitude amongst media audiences. In the case of news and visual media, audiences may view images of otherness, but see them as an unpleasant window into other people's worlds which can quickly be shut off to protect one's comfort and emotional balance. Moreover, as Bauman (1998) puts it, too often these events constitute 'carnivals of charity'. The result, a kind of televisual 'post-emotional' society (Mestrovic 1997) of synthetic emotions and packaged and performed sentiment, arguably fails to generate the deep emotional bonds necessary to effect change. Rather than being a 'bridge' to cosmopolitan values, these mediated experiences are merely an ambivalent 'door' which can be closed to protect those offended (disgusted) by the consumption of visual unpleasantries.

### **Exchange and cultural diffusion: global commodities as *bonnes à penser***

As we have suggested, the exchange of goods involves the exchange of ideas. As commodities, goods are reducible to quantities of money. But goods are much more, and as symbolic things, goods circulate a variety of unpredictable meanings. A can of Coca-Cola may be a mundane symbol of American cultural saturation and homogenisation, a glamorous symbol of the everyday exotic, or simply one variety of black, sweet sticky drink (Miller 1998). Likewise, Long and Villareal (2000) show that a maize husk can have a multiplicity of different meanings, it can 'have value for US consumers as an artifact of "traditional ethnic cuisine"; for Mexican peasants as a flexible currency for securing harvest labour; and for Mexican migrants in the United States as flexible reminders of home'. Global objects are thus located within local and national discourses which construct their meaning, flexibly cosmopolitan or not.

What forms and constitutes this discursive frame? We must look to economic exchange as the engine for this process. This focus on exchange should lead us to consider both the social and material forces that 'produce' global objects, and also the discourses and practices that frame them as exotic or 'other'. Braudel's (1992) studies of material life are valuable here in grounding the links between economic and cultural systems. Primarily conceived as a study of the historical intricacies of material life, Braudel in fact provides a useful account of some of the structural conditions for the diffusion of cultural difference, and thus is useful for understanding an important feature of the economic networks which diffuse cosmopolitan objects. Braudel's analysis mixes culture and economy as he shows how human activities of economic exchange are always culturally laden. The everyday fact of the emerging global economy of the sixteenth to nineteenth

centuries was its constitution as a system of exchanging ideas and cultural difference, for circulating the goods and commodities from one economic zone to another and so gradually transforming the cultural make-up of both trading partners in the process. Using a range of historical examples, Braudel reveals the structural and institutional factors responsible for the widespread circulation of objects, accounting for the infusion of the material into the everyday and showing how cultural practices and objects materially and visually constitute global cultural differences (if not global solidarity).

### **Status changes and the demand for culturally novel goods and experiences**

In the contemporary cultural economy, Petersen and Kern (1996:906) show how insularity and cultural narrowness are an outdated set of habits and markers of cultural distinction. Part of their conclusion is that standards of 'good taste' now involve knowledge and consideration of cultural goods produced outside one's own national culture. Indeed, in some circles, cultural difference becomes a highly positive status marker. As Petersen (1997: 87) puts it: being high status now does not require snobbishness, but means having cosmopolitan 'omnivorous' tastes. Being attuned to the cultural outputs of others requires inclusivity and the appreciation of cultural difference. Yet we cannot uncritically accept that 'inclusivity' and 'appreciating difference' are unproblematic cultural stances. Indeed, the attributes that Petersen and Kern have highlighted become culturally powerful because of their uneven distribution. As Skeggs (2003: 158) points out, such attitudes are based on relationships of 'ownership and entitlement' whereby certain groups, by virtue of their capacity to define the meaning of

cultural objects and peoples, are able to value and propertize cultural difference in exclusionary ways.

The research into omnivorous cultural consumers tells us a number of important things and teaches us some important lessons about the cosmopolitan consumer. It also raises questions about how a cosmopolitan mode of cultural consumption might be different to the omnivore model. First, we must understand that the identification of cultural omnivores has almost exclusively taken place in western, developed nations (see Petersen 2005). Additionally, there are important questions to ask about the usefulness of the omnivore pattern for conceptualising the cosmopolitan consumer. First, measurements of omnivorousness have primarily been undertaken through breadth and volume of a particular domain of consumption, related to a hierarchy structured along the low-high dimension. Necessarily using only simple measures, such a model is an unlikely way of furthering understanding of cosmopolitan consumers. The other pertinent aspect of the omnivore concept is that the corpus of studies have most frequently been carried out using the domain of music as a field of inquiry (Petersen, 2005; Van Rees, 1999), though there are now more complex interrelational studies emerging. Research by Warde et al (2007) has drawn attention to multiple types of omnivores. They argue that, to date, 'the social and aesthetic meanings associated with omnivorousness remain to be unravelled because almost all existing work has been based upon inference and interpretation from survey data, and one can only get so far in understanding individual's thoughts and actions using such a method' (Warde, Wright and Gayo-Cal 2007: 144). They find that there is not one omnivore type, but different ways of being an omnivore, constituting sets

of possible orientations for engaging with the global cosmoscape. Importantly, each type brings a different rationale and unique set of reasonings associated with their consumption, sometimes dealing with cultural difference in deep, reflexive ways and other times treating it as a routine, unsurprising and unlikely to relate to what we would consider to be genuinely cosmopolitan forms of social action. This suggests that not all consumers of cosmopolitan otherness will be actual cosmopolitans.

## **Conclusion**

The domain of aesthetics and popular culture has been the wellspring for popular expressions of everyday cosmopolitanism and, at least at some level, one cannot deny the positive effects associated with the increased visibility of cultural differences in cultural domains like food, music and spirituality. Yet the downside of this visible diversity of cultural possibilities is that they become differentially incorporated into systems of honour, taste and status. More than this, in doing so they become the basis for nuanced cultural knowledges and strategies amongst particular social groups, which hold the possibility of exclusionary practices – indeed, such a result is almost inevitable. Perhaps even worse, they become a taken-for-granted part of people’s consumption portfolios, where cultural difference has been included, appropriated, bounded, cleaned-up or contained, then effectively subjugated and incorporated into the mainstream. Our insistence on this treatment of cosmopolitanism, then, as a fundamentally material form of social communication, rather than as an ‘ideal’ or an attitude, leads to our rather sombre diagnosis.

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