

Impediments to Cosmopolitan Engagement: Technology and Late-Modern Cosmopolitanism

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Abstract

What characterises late modern variety of cosmopolitanism from its classical predecessors is the inherent connection between cosmopolitanism and technology. Technology enables a vital dimension of the cosmopolitan experience – to move beyond the cosmopolitan imagination to enable active, direct engagement with other cultures. Different types of technologies contribute to cosmopolitan practice but in this paper we focus on a specific set of these enabling technologies: technologies which play a crucial role in regulating the free movement of people and populations. We briefly examine how three of the great surveillance states of the 20th century – Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and the German Democratic Republic – used high-tech solutions in pursuing an anti-cosmopolitanism. We suggest that in the period from 2001 to the present, important elements of the cosmopolitan ethos are being closed down, and once again high-tech is intimately connected to this moment. The increasing (and proposed) use of identity cards, biometric identification systems, ITS and GIS all work to make the globalised world much harder to traverse and inhibit the full expression and experience of cosmopolitanism. The result of these trends may be that the type of cosmopolitan sentiment exhibited in western countries is an ersatz, emptied out variety with little political-ethical robustness.

Introduction

The notion of cosmopolitanism – crudely, the idea of global citizenship and an associated attitude of openness to other cultures – has received substantial attention in the recent sociological literature (for an overview and a critique of this literature, see Skrbis et al 2004). Though the expression of cosmopolitan sentiments has been shown not to be the preserve of culturally and economically privileged citizens alone, it has become common in the literature to suggest that the fruits of cosmopolitanism

are reserved for elites (e.g. Calhoun 2002; Kanter 1995), not least because a number of technologies provide vital enabling factors for cosmopolitan lifestyles. These enabling technologies include, most obviously, transportation technologies, the media and communications technologies. It is primarily through these mechanisms that the local or national citizen is understood as becoming imbricated in a global ethos.

It is clear, then, that a consideration of the technological means to global citizenship is important, since without technologies, the cosmopolitan is confined to his or her local time and space. It might be possible for an individual to develop and express cosmopolitan traits and outlooks in a de-technologised world with reduced opportunities for various types of mobility, though we can assume that such technologies promote the likelihood of cosmopolitan experience, especially face-to-face, physically proximate contact with others that is foundational of a deep cosmopolitical outlook. However, what is starting to become the object of sociological investigation is the ways in which technologies impede cosmopolitanism, reinforce traditional nation-state boundaries, and reduce circuits of global movement. What we emphasise in this paper is the way in which border/mobility technologies detract from this crucial dimension of cosmopolitan experience which we take to be embodied, experienced and involving direct engagement with others. In this paper, we investigate how an almost Orwellian control over nation-states in the period after September 11, 2001, threatens the cosmopolitan ethos.

Good tech: enabling cosmopolitanism

It goes without saying that the development of sciences and technologies ... breaks open the path, for better or worse, for a cosmopolitical communication. (Derrida 1994)

Derrida sums up a common theme in the cosmopolitanism literature: the extent to which the development of science and technology is a spur to the development of cosmopolitanism. To a great extent, this is because science and technology have allowed an increase in speed, scope and affordability of movement of individuals and of cultural goods and objects – and movement and mobility are keystones of cosmopolitanism (see, for example, Bauman 1996, and Urry 2000). Similarly, the

nomad – whether traveller, refugee, runaway – is the symbolic identity of the cosmopolitan age (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

We suggest that there is a clear connection here between cosmopolitan possibilities and the ways in which technology enables an individual to escape the traditional strictures of the nation state. In other words, those technologies that internationalise the life of the individual may often work to dissolve that individual's connection to their nation state and allow – indeed require – reflexive engagement with the cultural forms and styles of others. Of course, many recent technological innovations can work to encourage cosmopolitanism and also work to impede it – the (biometric) passport, for example, which allows some (but not all) to move freely around the globe (on the passport, see Torpey 2000). It might be assumed that the 'cosmopolitan disposition' is cultivated independently of these accoutrements of the state, at least to some degree. That is, stopping or slowing flows of some people may not necessarily stop the flow of cosmopolitanism *per se*. However – crucially - it may alter the type of cosmopolitanism on offer. What we may end up with is a flat, emptied out version of cosmopolitanism – an ersatz, consumptive, and celebratory version devoid of ethical, political power.

Bad Tech: Impeding Cosmopolitanism

Of course, there is a long history of technology – especially surveillance technology – being used to protect nations against the perils of cosmopolitanism. We might briefly mention three of the greatest surveillance nations ever to have existed, all of whom, by investment in technology, sought to keep themselves pure and to remove the possibility of pollution by foreigners. Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and the German Democratic Republic all invested an enormous amount in personnel and surveillance technology to maintain a fiercely nationalistic and anti-cosmopolitan attitude (Stalin even used the term 'cosmopolitan' as a pejorative label against those he saw as 'reactionaries'). As Koehler (1999) reports, the GDR organised perhaps the most impressive surveillance state of all time. 97,000 Stasi officers policed a population of just 17 million; when one takes account of part-time informers, it is thought that the ratio of state police personnel to the general population was an incredible 1:6.5. Nazi Germany, in spite of its best efforts, could only manage a ratio

of 1:2000, while the Soviet Union's ratio was 1:5830 (e.g. Funder 2002). In the surveillance operations of all these three states, the provision of high-tech spying devices to the secret police was the decisive element in how these surveillance states were kept strong. Aside from person-on-person spying, an enormous investment in camera surveillance, bugs, phone tapping, and complicated dossier systems were the foundations for a thorough knowledge of the population and its (dis)loyalty.

The fall of the Berlin Wall spelled the end – or so it seemed – for these sorts of projects of mass surveillance. While writers such as Foucault (1977) drew our attentions to the surveillant elements of the capitalist West, there was a certain amount of hyperbole in the claim that we lived in surveillant societies, and for the most part sociologists understood that surveillance was, in the main, reserved for the underclasses – in prisons, workhouses, and so forth. A new cosmopolitan outlook it was thought, accompanied the triumph of Western-style freedom over communism. This new cosmopolitanism – the opening up of a global society to Eastern Europe, and the end of the fortress mentality of the West – was in turn facilitated by techno-scientific innovations that provided the means to enjoy a new existence unbounded by the nation-state. East Germans, for example, now had access to much more than the few Western radio and television stations they could once only access illegally.

Balancing Security and Freedom?

When we fast forward to the period immediately after the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center in 2001, it is apparent that the efforts to deal with terrorism through technological innovation have had the effect of reducing the cosmopolitan ethos, and strengthening a more inwardly-focused nation-state strategic outlook. The Patriot Act in the USA, for example, allowed quite extreme powers of arrest and detention over non-resident aliens. Giorgio Agamben (1998, 2005) has been perhaps the most strident critic of this shift in global politics, drawing our attention to how attempts to secure the West have led to a diminution of freedoms for all. Agamben makes three important points. First, the sorts of biometric data collection that have started to become customary in the West (for example, fingerprinting and retinal scanning of aliens entering or in transit through the USA) are characteristic of authoritarian states, which always start policing foreigners before imposing such

requirements on the population as a whole (Agamben draws out the similarities between modern US biometrics and the tattooing favoured by the Nazi regime, and uses the Nazi experience to predict the spread of biometric 'tattooing'). Second, Agamben notes the revival of the 'camp'; towards the end of *Homo Sacer*, Agamben discusses how Auschwitz or the Gulag represents the 'nomos' of modernity, and we cannot fail to notice how Guantanamo Bay or Port Baxter represent a kind of normalising of the experience of the camp in the 21st-century West. The camp has become a rather unexceptional part of our society, and a part that most of our political leaders seem quite comfortable with. Agamben's third point, which to a certain extent encapsulates the other two, concerns what he terms the 'state of exception'. By this, Agamben refers to the way in which exceptional state powers (such as powers of indefinite detention of suspicious non-citizens, or the use of military trials in the place of normal civil criminal proceedings) can de-democratise states, and allow them to become authoritarian. These 'exceptional' powers can quickly become seen as normal, so as a state reacts against external threats, it develops anti-democratic impulses, limits the freedoms of all its citizens, and decries those who speak out against loss of freedom. Such states hide behind the 'war against terror' as the justification for measures which would once have seemed beyond the pale.

It is only through technological innovation that this 'state of exception' can come into existence. The development of biometrics, for example, holds out the possibility for the nation-state of fixing the identity of citizen, non-citizen, friend and terrorist alike. More generally, the idea of the body as a source of information (especially through DNA) has gained currency outside the realm of crime fighting (Nelkin and Andrews 2003). Elsewhere, CCTV, Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS) and the use of geographic information systems (including surveillance work around zip codes and other so-called geo-demographic systems) have delivered a number of ways to think about and introduce the possibility of a more surveillant society.

Societies of Control

Such technological innovations have allowed us to enter what Deleuze (1992) calls 'Societies of Control'. In this model, societies form a closely woven mesh of various surveillant technologies, which are loosely connected. Deleuze suggests we have

moved beyond Foucault's societies of surveillance. The citizen is no longer a *tabula rasa* disciplined by machines; rather, discipline is found in finer and subtler nets, in mundane practices and transactions, which make liberal citizens responsible for their own well-being. In control societies, a range of information sources, databases, etc, form a loose, rhizomic structure, which gradually creeps through the nooks and crannies of society; like a noxious weed, these rhizomic structures, on their own so thin and insubstantial, slowly choke society and grow into a thick, impenetrable configuration. Haggerty and Ericson (2000) call this configuration a 'surveillant assemblage'.

While there is much of interest in the Deleuzian position, as Stalder and Lyon (2003) argue, it is also possible that the surveillant assemblage can suddenly be concentrated in a single surveillant mechanism – a kind of return to the Foucaultian moment. Such a concentration can be seen, according to Stalder and Lyon, in the identity card. The identity card brings together all the databases – driving licence, medical records, fingerprints, retinal scan, and many more possibilities – in an integrated central register. While identity cards have been rejected recently in Australia, they are shortly to be introduced in the UK, have been used in Germany since 1987, and have been established in high-tech manifestations in many of the countries of south-east Asia (Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong). The debates in the UK are instructive, focusing on familiar discussions of security and freedom; but it is interesting that the fear of terrorism seems to be enabling the introduction of something on which there has been historically great opposition. To a certain extent, the arguments about safeguarding against terrorism are specious, of course: as Stalder and Lyon point out, profiles of terrorists often show that they have no criminal records, and usually have all the paperwork, visas, etc, that they need. None of the September 11 'terrorists' had criminal records, for example, while "there are no repeat suicide bombers" (Stalder and Lyon 2003: 85). While these sorts of schemes are used to mark and secure the internal spaces of the nation-state, it is also worth mentioning how they can be used in external policing (what some might call the work of empire). For example, the recent US reconstruction of Fallujah involved biometrics of the returning refugees, who were all retinally scanned, fingerprinted and given

compulsory identity cards. In this way, the new, rebuilt Fallujah was peopled with a perfectly 'known' population.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, we have investigated the links between technology innovation and cosmopolitanism. We certainly do not wish to argue for any form of technological determinism, and it seems to us clear that technologies can facilitate or impede cosmopolitanism. Human beings on their own do not achieve much; technologies allow them to extend their actions, to make them last, to make them more powerful. Accordingly, we suggest that technologies such as air travel and cable TV facilitated what might come to be seen with hindsight as the high point of the cosmopolitan moment – between 1989 and 2001. And yet technology has also facilitated the current closing down of the cosmopolitan ethos in the period after 2001: identity cards and biometric technologies have been used in a return to the safety of the nation-state, and have promised to protect us from dangerous aliens. The fond hope is that these technologies can protect the nation-state and permit the rapid global movement of the 'legitimate' traveller, for example; such is the goal of machine-readable passports, which, it is hoped, will trap the ne'er-do-well while speeding up the passage of the innocent. What seems more likely is a rather crude sorting based on race, appearance, nationality, religion, will exacerbate the differences between the haves and the have-nots. The cosmopolitanism that develops under such conditions – based on the undemanding dimensions of the cosmopolitan disposition - is brittle and vulnerable. It consumes with enthusiasm from the cosmopolitan salver, but deals with ethical issues in a discretionary, insular manner.

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