

## **Investigating the idea of cosmopolitan openness: strategies, repertoires and practices**

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### **Abstract**

This paper forms a part of a larger project on people's attitudes towards globalisation which combines qualitative and quantitative data. The qualitative data was collected through focus groups, whereas the quantitative component builds on data available through set of questions on attitudes towards globalisation which were included into the recent Australian Election Study survey (Bean et al. 2004). This paper reports on the qualitative data.

Despite diverse understandings of cosmopolitanism, most authors agree that cosmopolitans espouse a broadly defined disposition of 'openness' toward others, displayed in cultural, political or aesthetic domains. It is argued that such an attitude is expressed by an emotional and ethical commitment towards universalism, selflessness, wordliness and communitarianism. Some dimensions of the study lent themselves directly to debates on cosmopolitanism. The participants saw themselves as conscious beneficiaries of an increasingly interconnected world and its economic and cultural prospects. They generally expressed cosmopolitan sentiments by referring to easily accepted opportunities associated with globalisation (eg. travel, foods, music) rather than the more difficult aspects of openness such as showing hospitality to strangers, or accepting human interest ahead of perceived national interests. This view was clearly counterbalanced, however, by sentiments of fear of 'dilution of culture' and 'culture loss'.

### **Introduction**

A vast body of research in the social sciences understands globalisation as a key determinant of modern social experience (e.g., Held et al. 1999; Giddens 1999). Events and processes that occur beyond national borders frequently shape the collective life and mood of the nation and the individual lives and outlooks of its citizens. From hot, potent issues like terrorism, the arrival of refugees, international crime and its punishment, and environmental degradation, to forms of leisure and entertainment associated with celebrity, sport, film and movies, the everyday lives of Australian locals are increasingly and inextricably situated within a variety of global

'scapes'. This paper, based on qualitative data, looks at the symbolic and discursive imaginings that shape actors' feelings about, and reactions to, such processes.

We understand globalisation as a dynamic framework which contextualises elements of people's daily experiences. We therefore expect that social actors will have a range of attitudes, feelings and schemas to interpret and reflect upon global events and processes. Concomitantly, the expression of such sentiments is closely related to what can be thought of as a cosmopolitan disposition. For the purpose of this argument we accept the notion of openness although we acknowledge that it is a rather diffuse and vague concept. We define openness as an individual's predisposition to feel interested in, accepting of, or empathetic to, things originating in other cultures or other countries.

Despite its appalling analytical value, the notion of openness to the world provides a useful, albeit elementary, way of understanding the extent to which people are located on the continuum of cosmopolitanism – a continuum on which more openness, tolerance and acceptance of diversity corresponds with more intensely cosmopolitan identity. The data we report in this paper looks at how these themes find expression in everyday domains.

### **Methodology**

The focus group data we report in this paper are derived from a larger project concerned with understanding the meanings people from socially diverse backgrounds give to things, events and processes that are global. Our ambition was to interrogate the discursive detail which underpins these larger themes and finds expression in talk about everyday domains, such as food, travel etc. In addition, we sought people's opinions about global environmental issues, attitudes toward immigration, buying local and Australian made produce, preferences for tourist travel, and fielded reactions to untitled photographs of (apparently) foreign sites and places. The data were collected from nine focus groups, each containing between 5-11 participants, who were recruited by a professional research company. Participants were selected along standard sampling parameters (e.g. age, family income, birthplace, level of educational attainment), using purposive sampling design.

Social researchers know that the capacity of focus group methodology is limited in a variety of ways. Generally, one could say that it is a rather blunt research method. However, its relative strength as a research methodology is in gaining access to the schemes, concepts and talk of participants, which constitute a type of discursive framing for the interpretation of particular topics.

### **Theorising Cosmopolitan Openness**

The fundamental problem that the students of cosmopolitanism have to encounter is the multitude of ways of defining and understanding cosmopolitanism. There are those who proclaim the utter contempt for defining cosmopolitanism. Pollock et al. (2000) for example argue that defining cosmopolitanism is the most un-cosmopolitan thing to do. On the other hand, Kanter (1995) posits cosmopolitanism as something personified in exclusive lifestyles and dispositions of the 'world class' business elite.

In our earlier work (Skrbis et al. 2004) we flag disagreement with both the defeatism of Pollock and colleagues, and the narrowness of Kanter's approach. In order to see cosmopolitanism as a useful analytical tool we suggested that it needs to be seen as a set of practices and dispositions, grounded in social structures. In this paper we draw on authors who see cosmopolitanism as an empirically verifiable practice and/or set of dispositions. Beck (2002: 79-80), for example, lists thirteen different 'empirical indicators of *cosmopolitization*' that range from international travel to questions of political representation and manifestations of ecological crises. Urry (2000) and Held (2002) provide a more selective list of cosmopolitan practices and dispositions. In Held's reasoning, there are three requirements of cultural cosmopolitanism. These include the recognition of the interconnectedness of political communities, an understanding of overlapping collective fortunes, and an ability to empathize with others and to celebrate difference, diversity and hybridity. For Urry, the cosmopolitan is characterized by an ability to be mobile, the capacity to consume diverse cultural symbols and goods, a willingness to take risks by virtue of encountering the 'other', the ability to reflexively observe and judge different cultures, the possession of semiotic skills to interpret images of others, and general openness to other people and cultures. We see these attempts to ground and specify the forms of cosmopolitan practice as an important way of understanding cosmopolitanism as a dynamic, diverse and socially meaningful way of people's engagement with society.

Despite these varied attributes of cosmopolitanism, we emphasised elsewhere (Skrbis et al 2004) that most contemporary commentators concur that cosmopolitanism – as a subjective outlook, attitude or practice – is associated with a conscious openness to the world and to cultural differences (Hannerz 1996; Held 2002; Tomlinson 1999; Vertovec and Cohen 2002). As Hannerz (1990: 238) correctly puts it, cosmopolitanism is ‘a perspective, a state of mind’ but our intention is to give voice to these outlooks amongst a diverse groups of social actors. We used the earlier mentioned orienting conceptual schemes to gain an understanding of ways in which individuals relate to a range of issues relating to globalisation. The diverse range of discourses that have emerged reinforced some of the themes that have already been identified in the previous research (Holton and Phillips 2001; Bean 2002; Holton 2000).

#### **Data: The Dilemmas of Cosmopolitan Openness**

What are the everyday understandings and meanings that form the basis for participant’s ideas about ‘openness’? We can summarise the idea of openness expressed by our participants as an *expanded or elaborated field of social action*. That is, everyday discourses of openness rested on a general understanding that globalisation increasingly opens up social spaces that allow for, or permit, particular actions, practices and repertoires. We identified three major themes in relation to this opening up of social spaces in the talk by our participants.

- a) The first and decidedly most dominant theme was related to the field of economic activity. On the positive side, it was correlated with personal freedom, opportunities and consumerism; on the negative side it was linked to exploitation, commercialisation and alienation.
- b) The second was the tension between one of the clearest expressions of cosmopolitan openness – the desire to remove all borders and boundaries and unreservedly embrace otherness and the fear for local/home culture.
- c) The third relates to new openness to the world as a result of opportunities linked to proliferation of new communication technologies and unprecedented mobilities. These are generally associated with positive trappings of globalisation but are also the sites which create awareness of new

globalisation-related vulnerabilities, such as terrorism, pollution and moral decadence.

*Opportunities and freedoms in the economic domain*

The first theme relates to perceived personal economic freedoms and benefits afforded by globalisation, especially within various fields of consumption. This is the most dominant positive discourse about globalisation and can be identified in the discussion of all groups. In the first instance, it is understood as a field where the range of personal choice is enhanced. For our participants globalisation means that there is now a vast 'supermarket' of goods, images and services that can be accessed locally or, for that matter, irrespective of location. This allows consumers to 'pick and choose', according to their own preferences and desires, products from around the world. This enthusiasm for non-local cultural goods allows individuals to open up the horizons of their cultural consumption, affording cultivation of distinctive cultural capital. A participant in Group 7 outlines this global supermarket vividly and enthusiastically:

I think that how I shop is to buy the best from every country. So whatever that country is famous for I'd get it. That's a way that globalisation has allowed, because you know the wine in whatever country in Europe is the best and you'd go and get that. Oysters in New Zealand are the best so you'd get that.

The idea that 'I can get anything and everything I want' means that the symbolic privilege of the local product has been negated, except for forms of produce that are perceived to be difficult to transport without sacrificing quality, such as seafood or fresh vegetables. It is apparent that there is no longer a feeling of responsibility to consume things of local origin. Instead, a common sentiment was that globalisation allows shoppers to consume the cheapest items on offer, whatever their source.

The corporate competition associated with globalisation is not just about cheap canned tuna or cheaper telephone calls. It also fits in with individuals' agenda for cultivating their leisure pursuits and hobbies, and identities. For example, Steve (Group 1) indulges his love of motorcycling by building a Harley-Davidson from scratch: "I'm saving \$7500 on importing a Harley frame instead of buying it local. It would cost me \$11000 in Australia, but I can get it for \$3500 landed here in

Australia". Moreover, Steve has built up networks and friendships within the international biker community through a website he operates with his partner:

The lady I live with and I run a biker website which is international. We've made several friends and a couple of them are going to relocate to Australia from America... we intend to sponsor these people so that they can move to Australia and experience good riding.

New communication technologies also allow hobbies to expand into private businesses, so the 'backyard business' – though still small in operational size – now has a global reach that brings people with niche interests into contact with each other. For example, bird breeder Philip (Group 3) has published his own book:

I wrote a book, I breed parrots for a hobby, and I published a book on parrots and through the internet I've sold 2000 copies, all around the world through the internet from Finland to Brazil. Unbelievable.

This linking of globalisation with opportunities in economic domain is only one aspect of the story. When research participants were asked to say what comes to their mind when they think of globalisation, the talk about opportunities was strongly counterbalanced with terms such as 'domination', 'big companies' and 'commercialisation'. Furthermore, multinational companies and Western governments were seen as engaging in relentless pursuit of profit and strategic resources.

#### *The desire to remove borders versus the loss of home culture*

A further set of positive capacities for openness associated with globalisation relates to the idea of 'opening one's eyes' to other cultural styles and possibilities. In this sense, it is the most 'pure' cosmopolitan sentiment, emphasising learning about other cultures for its own sake, and the utopian idea that we could live in a borderless world of free exchanges. The following comment from Charmaine, Group 3, is exceptional within our data, but best sums up the idea that globalisation can foster genuine cosmopolitan mixing through the removal of boundaries and by putting humanity ahead of national interest:

I think globalisation is a positive thing. Sooner or later it makes everyone look at themselves. They have to, because you're removing boundaries. My vision of globalisation is the whole world as a human race living on the planet and you're all starting to interact and you have your little tiffs about your ideas, but sooner or later you all have to live on the same planet. So my view is that globalisation is a positive step towards that.

The positives associated with the opening up of the world and the abilities of cultures to cross the boundaries of nations and continents has been strongly counterbalanced with the view that we are witnessing an unprecedented cultural homogenisation. 'Cultural domination', 'control', 'standardisation', 'Americanisation' and even 'cultural imperialism' were all repeatedly brought up in focus group discussions. Globalisation was seen as clearly underpinning this process and in many ways these discussions were lay exemplifications of 'McDonaldisation' (Ritzer 2004) and 'Jihad vs McWorld' theses (Barber 1995) as well as the existing discussions about Americanisation of culture (Bennet et al. 1999).

The Americanisation was not seen as a positive manifestation of global processes. Indeed it was portrayed as a 'loss of culture' and monotonous and un-rewarding cultural homogenisation. A drama student was recounting her experience at University:

I'm in my third year and we all have to speak American next year, just so that we can get work in Australia... so we are losing our voice in a way. This is what Toni Collette was going on about, that we are going to lose our Australian voice.

There was a wide ranging consensus among participants that the emerging monoculture is a bad thing, that immersion in global culture doesn't give you licence to understand your local context: "[People] will talk on the net for 2-3 hours to someone in Paris or LA, but they won't even say hello to the neighbour."

Nevertheless, cultural homogenisation has its advantages also. What follows is Mark's story which, although it can be interpreted in different ways, testifies somewhat ironically to the positive aspects of homogenisation:

2-3 yrs ago I was in Taiwan... I arrived at 3AM, found a hotel; I don't know how I can't read any of the script. In the morning I thought I'm hungry. I went outside and within a few minutes I saw the golden arches, and then a Starbucks, and then I went into a store and saw the Avian water, so I knew without thinking what I can and can't eat in a new country. I went in there and looked at the menu, again it was all in Chinese but it didn't matter because I knew what I wanted. It was a comfort thing that was valuable to me intrinsically. To be able to say I don't speak any of the language, but I can eat, I can drink, I can have a coffee.

Short term [I think this is a] good thing, I woke up in the morning thinking what am I going to eat. This hotel doesn't serve food. I'm hungry, and the

brain was able to recognize these points and that was good. Bad thing is that I missed out on sampling the local culture, which I did later on...

### *Communication and mobilities*

A further set of capacities associated with the ideas of openness relates to mobilities. This capacity for mobility is enabled through the sphere of international travel, and also through various communication technologies that allow long-distance personal and business relationships to be sustained. Openness is partially understood as the capacity of individuals to undertake travel to other parts of the world. The decision of where to travel to is framed and delimited by participant's understandings of safe/dangerous, friendly/unfriendly, pleasant/difficult. Notwithstanding the apparent fear of terrorism, and the expressed repulsion held for some parts of the world which weighs into the thinking of some participants, there is generally a positive disposition toward travel opportunities. This can be related to an intrinsic interest in experiencing other cultures.

Additionally, internet, telecommunications, satellite links and related technologies allow personal relationships to be maintained despite distances, and for people to keep in touch with home while abroad. For example, Vanessa from Group 1 reports: "My friends are always travelling and working overseas, and with the new technology it just makes it so much easier to keep in contact with them. With email we can see pictures and we don't really miss out on each other's lives".

As part of the focus group protocol we solicited reactions to images of well-known places (Eiffel Tower), cityscapes (New York, Tokyo), iconic images (Mickey Mouse), signs ('Australia Made') and places (airport lounge at Changi Airport). This exercise produced some interesting results. For example, the image of Tokyo street with a large street corner advertisement for Panasonic, featuring a female model was seen as an embodiment of 'a sleaze city', and a woman herself as a prostitute, evoking an image of exploitation. The images from the cities of New York and Tokyo have evoked other negative connotations: 'smog', 'pollution', 'busyness', 'stress', 'loss of individualism'. Perhaps the most interesting reaction was triggered by the image of a plane parked at the other side of the airport lounge viewing glass. All Muslim participants perceived this image as something associated with New York and 9/11 while only one other non-Muslim participant made this connection. What might have

appeared as a rather unproblematic depiction of places, for example, became symptomatic of deeper underlying cultural or existential anxieties.

### **Conclusion**

The paper shows that at the heart of the idea of 'openness', the concept at the very centre of conceptions of cosmopolitanism, is a fragile commitment to the broad gamut of cosmopolitan experiences and ideals. Everyday ideas about openness as expressed within the talk of our participants seems to be a most brittle form of cosmopolitanism, fractured by deeply structured feelings and allegiances regarding self and others, friends and enemies, and local and global, which seem to inhibit the full expression of cosmopolitan openness. Moreover, ideas about openness are strongly linked to positive experiences frequently based in what we might see as the relatively easy behavioural components of the cosmopolitan disposition: for example, as related to the consumption of food, overseas travel, and music. Openness is therefore most likely to be endorsed as a feature of the global world when it is associated with enjoyable experiences that cultivate one's identity and offer fulfilling experiences, and negatively coded when it is experienced as an engagement with other cultures that is perceived to be threatening or challenging. This observation gives credence to Hannerz's statement that cosmopolitans can be 'dilettantes as well as connoisseurs' (Hannerz 1992: 253).

Our research participants were drawn selectively to cosmopolitan experiences and ideals. They adopted what could be seen as an ambivalent and largely self-centred relationship to cosmopolitan experience that rested upon a strategic, individualist embracing of cosmopolitan experience in some realms and a fear or rejection of cosmopolitan ideals within others. If anything, these are *strategic cosmopolitans* who see cosmopolitanism as a tool for negotiation of life chances in an increasingly interconnected and open world.

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