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Vernacular Cosmopolitanism

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Vernacular cosmopolitanism, an oxymoron that joins contradictory notions of local specificity and universal enlightenment, is at the crux of current debates on cosmopolitanism. These pose the question whether the local, parochial, rooted, culturally specific and demotic may co-exist with the translocal, transnational, transcendent, elitist, enlightened, universalist and modernist – whether boundary-crossing demotic migrations may be compared to the globe trotting travel, sophisticated cultural knowledge and moral world-view of deracinated intellectuals. Indeed, the question is often reversed to ask whether there can be an enlightened normative cosmopolitanism which is not rooted, in the final analysis, in patriotic and culturally committed loyalties and understandings.

Vernacular cosmopolitanism belongs to a family of concepts, all of which combine in similar fashion apparently contradictory opposites: cosmopolitan patriotism, rooted cosmopolitanism, cosmopolitan ethnicity, working-class cosmopolitanism, discrepant cosmopolitanism. Such conjunctions attempt to come to terms with the conjunctural elements of postcolonial and

precolonial forms of cosmopolitanism and travel, while probing the conceptual boundaries of cosmopolitanism and its usefulness as an analytic concept. Vernacular cosmopolitanism is perhaps the most ambiguous of these conjunctural terms: are we talking about *non-elite* forms of travel and trade in a postcolonial world, as in the case of the Senegalese Mourides described by Diouf (2000) and others, or of *non-European* but nevertheless *high* cultures produced and consumed by non-western elites, such as those of the Sanskritic, Urdu, Persian or Ottoman worlds? The Sanskritic cosmopolis spanned an area extending from Afghanistan to Java and from Sri Lanka to Nepal, a non-western but nevertheless cosmopolitan literary world that is contrasted by Pollock with the vernacular traditions that succeeded it. Are we to define, by analogy, contemporary Hindi/Urdu or Cantonese cultural worlds as cosmopolitan, or as vernacular? So too, how are we to place minority elites in new postcolonial nations who struggle to defend their vernacular cultures, and seek justice through multicultural citizenship, while being at the same time liberal, tolerant and highly educated world travellers (R. Werbner, 2002)? Werbner calls such cosmopolitan practice among Kalanga elites in Botswana 'cosmopolitan ethnicity'.

The world-view of Kalanga 'reasonable radicals' highlights the conjunctural features of cosmopolitanism, the fact that vernacular ethnic rootedness does not negate openness to cultural difference or the fostering of a universalist civic consciousness and a sense of moral responsibility beyond the local. This is also the point made by Kwame Anthony Appiah (1998), who argues that cosmopolitanism is equally an argument *within* postcolonial states on citizenship, equal dignity, cultural rights and the rule of law. Appiah speaks of cosmopolitan 'patriotism', a 'rooted' cosmopolitanism, and proposes that cosmopolitans begin from membership in morally and emotionally significant communities (families, ethnic groups) while espousing notions of toleration and openness to the world, the transcendence of ethnic difference and the moral responsibility for and incorporation of the other. Postcolonial migrant elites may and do feel sentimentally attached to several homes in several different countries.

Postcolonial elites differ nevertheless in significant senses from international labour migrants and diasporics. The question raised by Ulf Hannerz is whether these may legitimately be labelled cosmopolitan at all. Hannerz proposes a set of useful distinctions between cosmopolitans 'willing to engage with the Other', locals, 'representatives of more circumscribed territorial cultures', and transnationals (1992: 252), frequent travellers (usually occupational) who share 'structures of meaning carried by social networks' (1992: 248–9). In contrast to foreign correspondents or oil engineers, he lumps migrants' and refugees' transnational cultures, the demotic travellers of a global age, with 'tourists' because, he says, they regard involvement with other cultures as a 'necessary cost' (1992: 248). This has led to accusations of elitism and Eurocentrism (P. Werbner, 1999). In my own work I bring a counter-example of 'working-class cosmopolitanism' in the figure of the expanding cosmopolitan subjectivity of a Pakistani migrant worker working on a building site in the Gulf, a simple man who embraces different cultures and is a member of diverse ethnic groups, but who nevertheless retains his localized rooted identity as a Sufi.

The challenge to the idea that cosmopolitans are necessarily members of the elite was first posed by James Clifford who reflects on the status of companion servants, guides and migrant labourers, and reflects upon the grounds of equivalence between privileged and unprivileged travellers (1992: 106–7). Clifford proposes that 'the project of comparing and translating different travelling cultures need not be class- or ethno-centric' (1992: 107). The differential, often violent, displacements that impel locals to travel create, he says, 'discrepant' cosmopolitanisms (1992: 108). The notion that there are many, different, cosmopolitan practices co-existing in late modernity, with their own historicities and distinctive world-views, has led to an exploration of marginal cosmopolitanisms. Homi Bhabha, who possibly coined the term vernacular cosmopolitanism, is uneasy with Martha Nussbaum's image of the self as at the centre of a series of concentric circles, with universal liberal values privileged above family, ethnic group or nation (Nussbaum, 1994). The notion of a borderless cosmopolitan community seems inadequate in relation to the millions of refugees and migrants fleeing violence and poverty. Drawing on Appiah's vision, Bhabha proposes a 'cosmopolitan community envisaged in *marginality*', a border zone which he terms vernacular cosmopolitanism (1996: 195–6).

Despite the fact that Hannerz has revised his position, acknowledging that more people beyond the elite may now be identified as cosmopolitan, he notes that 'bottom-up' cosmopolitans are unlikely to be recognized as such in their own environment (2004: 77). This raises the critical question of cosmopolitan consciousness: in what sense does cosmopolitanism need to be grounded in an open, experimental, inclusive, normative consciousness of the cultural other? Such a consciousness would need to include elements of self-doubt and reflexive self-distantiation, an

awareness of the existence and equal validity of other cultures, other values, and other mores. Is travel without such an inclusive consciousness cosmopolitan? Does travel inevitably lead to such openness and reflexivity? Despite their global commercial acumen, Senegalese Mouride traders are said to engage in 'rites of social exclusiveness' so that 'Mouride diasporic culture is homogenised in a way that excludes foreign values' (Diouf, 2000: 694, 695). Similarly, members of the jet-setting wealthy Chinese overseas trading diaspora studied by Aihwa Ong, with their multiple passports and multiple homes in different countries, appear to lack the kind of cultural openness and sensitivity normally associated with cosmopolitanism. Diasporas, by definition, are heterogeneous, and not all their members are equally cosmopolitan (P. Werbner, 1999). Sometimes it is factory workers rather than wealthy merchants who display more openness to their non-diasporic compatriots. Diasporic intellectuals may be alienated from their working-class compatriots despite their celebration of cultural hybridity. But not all diasporic elites are so alienated. Similarly, not all Senegalese in Italy are inward-looking, even if Mourides regard Italy as a 'polluting' environment. Riccio reports that Senegalese in Italy are a multi-ethnic and multi-religious community who seek, as one migrant told him, not 'only to look for jobs. To emigrate is to know new things, to broaden one's horizons in such a way that one can bring back home what one discovered and learned.'

Much depends on context. Some environments are more cosmopolitan than others. Zubaida invokes the 'legendary cosmopolitan enclaves of Cairo, but especially Alexandria, the paradigm case of Middle Eastern cosmopolitanism' – a hub of ideas, religions, goods and people from East and West, protected by an imperial context. Thessalonica was, according to Kenneth Brown, 'a great Balkan cosmopolitan city for centuries, a veritable Babel of languages, religions, cultures and local traditions'. If we take vernacular cosmopolitanism to refer to a multi-centred world, beyond the West, in the sense proposed by Arjun Appadurai, it is perhaps among the elites of such cosmopolitan cities that distinctive vernacular cosmopolitanisms are created.

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