

Lilie Chouliaraki Cosmopolitanism

Book section

Original citation:

Chouliaraki, Lilie (2016) Cosmopolitanism. In: Gray, John and Ouelette, L., (eds.) Media Studies. New York University Press, New York, USA.

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This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/66052/>

Available in LSE Research Online: May 2016

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Cosmopolitanism

What is cosmopolitanism and why does it matter? How can we study cosmopolitanism in ways that help us understand it as both a framework for the critique of power and a catalyst for imagining alternative orders? In addressing these questions, the aim is to recuperate cosmopolitanism as a normative project that challenges its Western conditions of possibility and recognizes vulnerable others as others with their own claims to humanity and justice.

Whether it is refugees crossing the Mediterranean, war victims in Syria or hurricane homeless in the Philippines, our everyday life is saturated by the suffering of distant others. Mundane as these distant news may appear in everyday media flows, they are not at all insignificant. They are fundamental. This is not simply because they are there to inform us or campaign for the victims. They are fundamental because they maintain the self-definition of Western liberal democracies not simply as political regimes of national welfare but also as ethical projects of trans-national care and solidarity in the name of 'common humanity' (Linklater 2007).

Indeed, against those who situate the heart of Western democracies in the political institutions of the nation, such as Parliament, I argue that the heart of our democracies lies primarily in our capacity to feel, think and act for distant others. And against those who reserve our capacity to connect to the suffering members of our nation, I contend that, insofar as Western democracies place the wellbeing of the 'human' at the centre of their political legitimacy, their communities of solidarity extend beyond the nation and encompass the world (Chouliaraki 2006).

Cosmopolitan solidarity, then, defined as the moral imperative to act on human suffering without asking back, arises precisely out of this double imperative of Western politics: to govern within the nation but to extend the nation's scope of care to far away others. Evidence of the tensions inherent in this imperative is the European response to the migration crisis in 2015-16, the greatest moment of human mobility and mass suffering after the Second World War. Motivated by the cosmopolitan commitment to offer hospitality to the vulnerable, Europe's rhetoric was primarily about rescue and humanitarian assistance, yet its practice was fraught with inner conflict and discontinuous action. Whilst this historical example could be treated as evidence of the precariousness of cosmopolitan politics, it also strongly reminds us that cosmopolitanism acquires its most urgent and compelling normative significance when situated within the problematic of Western liberalism and its dual relationship to democratic practice – not only as national but also as trans-national commitment to human suffering. Unless this commitment remains alive, there is little hope for those who live outside Western safety and prosperity.

There are, undoubtedly, various other normative values that inform competing visions of cosmopolitanism. As a cultural project of actually existing practices of hybrid tastes, choices and lifestyles, cosmopolitanism aspires to establish a moral imagination of multicultural conviviality (Beck 2006). As a political project driven by global institutions of international law and human rights, it aspires to work towards a peaceful and fair international order (Held 2010). And as a methodological project of comparative research that rejects nation-bound knowledge production, cosmopolitanism encourages scientific

interpretations of the world as communities of fate linked by shared risk (Beck & Szneider 2006).

The social, institutional and epistemological value of these approaches granted, I would nonetheless insist that the most meaningful narrative of cosmopolitanism relies on the moral project of recognizing the humanity of others and acting upon them without demanding reciprocation. It is in this recognition that cosmopolitanism becomes both empirically relevant to the realities of our world, as the refugees example demonstrates, and politically useful, as a much-needed catalyst for critique and social change. Indeed, unless cosmopolitanism acts as an instrument of *both* critical reflection upon its own conditions of possibility *and* moral imagination about the nature of humanity itself, it runs an important risk: getting reduced to a Western project of global togetherness that, instead of foregrounding social inequality, is co-opted in new projects of power.

Indeed, skeptical accounts of the cosmopolitan project rest precisely on the diagnosis that, for all its promising rhetoric, cosmopolitanism reproduces an ethically dubious and politically harmful disjunction: it may claim to rest on the respect of global plurality but is, in fact, a universalist form of (Western) hegemony. Cultural cosmopolitanism, to begin with, has been accused of celebrating difference yet ultimately misrecognizing a free-market world as the realization of borderless paradise (Calhoun 2003). Political cosmopolitanism is under attack for, despite its celebration of human rights, it privileges a neo-colonial geo-politics in North-global-South relationships (Hardt & Negri 2006). As for the methodological project, it has been met with suspicion on the grounds that it may acknowledge trans-national connectivities, yet promotes Western research agendas and interpretations (Pries & Seeliger 2012).

Their differences granted, these critiques of cosmopolitanism converge on one assumption: insofar as the concept is born out of the liberal imagination itself, it is condemned to reproduce liberalism's own impasses: its entanglement with its colonial past and its embrace with the market. In contrast to this determinist diagnosis, reminiscent of Critical School pessimism, my argument is that, despite cosmopolitanism's affinities to Western democratic politics, there is no a priori verdict dictating how its moral vision is articulated, at different historical moments. Rather, insofar as cosmopolitan morality remains oriented towards human need, then the possibility is always there both for a re-thinking of what the human is and for re-formulating what the global order is and which interests it should serve.

Notwithstanding its legacies with history and power, then, cosmopolitanism as an ethico-political project does have the potential to act as a critical tool, which can problematize and re-imagine the very political order that enabled it to emerge, in the first place. And one key precondition for this potentiality lies in the capacity of critical social sciences to produce sensitive accounts of two properties of cosmopolitanism: its historicity and its performativity.

The *historicity* of cosmopolitanism raises questions about its enfoldment in the political, economic and technological contexts that give rise to it, in particular moments. Is the cosmopolitanism of the early 20th century the same as that of the Cold War era and does the latter resemble today's multi-lateral order? How are they different and in which ways are these differences associated to the

distinct possibilities and constraints afforded to the cosmopolitan moment by the technologies, political ideologies and economic relations of its time? A comparison between various popular genres of cosmopolitan solidarity, such as appeals, celebrities, concerts and disaster news in the past 50 years identifies a paradigmatic shift in the caring sensibilities of the West. Whilst the period between de-colonisation and the mid-1980ies was largely marked by an 'other-oriented' morality in the name of salvation and revolution (the grand narratives of saving lives or changing the world), today we are witnessing a 'self-oriented' morality, which still invites care for distant others but increasingly relies on minor self-gratifications and transient pleasures as our motivation for action on their suffering (Chouliaraki 2013).

The *performativity* of cosmopolitanism refers to its enfoldment in practices of meaning-making, such as language, image or the body, which constitute the sufferer as human and invite particular forms of action upon her/him as legitimate, at the moment that they claim to simply 'report' or 'reflect' them. What are the aesthetics and narratives of communicating suffering and in which ways do differences between them produce different moral claims to cosmopolitan care? Why and how does this matter? These questions have motivated intense debates among professionals, in humanitarianism or journalism, and scholars. While they may ultimately be unresolvable, given the intimate complicity of these fields to colonial practices of de-humanisation and othering, they also sustain important conversations about how aesthetic form and narrative content contribute to collective imaginations of humanity and care.

In conclusion, whilst the need for cosmopolitanism values remains urgent, the ethico-political project of cosmopolitanism is undermined not only by its histories, but also by its definitions and applications. The challenge for cosmopolitanism today is, therefore, to reformulate its normative value away from visions of global togetherness and towards a systematic critique of power and the imagination of a safe and fairer global order for every human being.

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