

Faces of Cosmopolitanism

Approaches and Case Studies

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With the rise of mass migration following the collapse of historical empires, cosmopolitanism has become one of the most widely discussed issues in the humanities and social sciences. To what extent do cosmopolitan attitudes foster transcultural communication and openness? To what extent do they rely on Western-centric norms and role models? Perhaps these are the two most important questions critics dealing with cosmopolitanism explore. In everyday speech, the term designates an open-minded, metropolitan attitude, which is understood as the opposite of parochialism. In critical discourse, however, unresolved contradictions and the abundance of new terms, such as “vernacular cosmopolitanism” (Bhabha) and “partial cosmopolitanism” (Appiah), make it more challenging to provide a straightforward answer to the above questions. This thematic cluster, which has grown out of a workshop organised by the “Cosmopolitan Ethics and the Modern City” research group at Károli Gáspár University, offers both an introduction to the central critical debates in the field and three case studies that explore the significance of cosmopolitanism in late-twentieth-century and contemporary literary works.

COSMOPOLITANISM: ORIGINS AND CORE CONCEPTS

The phrase “citizen of the world” originates in classical antiquity. According to Robert Spencer, it is this historical meaning that roughly corresponds to how the term “cosmopolitan” is used today: “In its colloquial usage cosmopolitanism

still means roughly what it meant to the Cynics of the fourth century BC and later to the Stoics, to Christian intellectuals such as Saint Paul and to Enlightenment thinkers like Voltaire and Kant: devotion to humanity and detachment from local bonds” (2). Unconditional acceptance and an empathic awareness, associated with cosmopolitanism since antiquity, are at the heart of this quasi-utopian discourse. Nevertheless, novels that portray the contemporary world often demonstrate the limits of the cosmopolitan ideal: Teju Cole’s *Open City* (2011) has been read as a paradigmatic example of these constraints (Vermeuleen 42; Mózes 60; Barta 225), along with Rushdie’s latest writings (Ball 315; Györke, “Rushdie” 190). In the thematic cluster that follows, Edit Gálla’s article examines how Bret Easton Ellis’s *The Informers* (1994) depicts the failure of the cosmopolitan ethos due to the consumerism that eradicates meaningful life choices. Although the term “citizen of the world” may have roughly the same meaning across different historical and geographical contexts, the contributions in this section show that it is precisely the diverse and continuously transforming nature of the cosmopolitan disposition that advances the conceptual development of this discourse.

Spencer’s summary also demonstrates that iconic thinkers have shaped the theoretical perspective of cosmopolitanism throughout its history. According to tradition, Diogenes the Cynic was the first to claim that he was a “citizen of the world” around 400 BC (Taraborelli x; Stanley 145). Since the Enlightenment, Kant’s “Perpetual Peace” (1795) has been a key reference. Kant’s vision of a “league” of peace that “would seek to end all wars for good” and his idea of “universal hospitality” (Kant 104–108) have become the basis of modern cosmopolitan thought. Postcolonial and feminist scholars, nevertheless, have called attention to the limits of the Kantian vision by arguing that this discourse universalises an experience available only to a select few (Hall 27–31; Bhabha, *Location* xiv; Vieten 3). The new approaches to cosmopolitanism discussed below originate from this critique.

Upon closer examination of the term’s origin, however, it becomes clear that the concept was less elitist than it is often assumed to be. For instance, the notion of being on the periphery has played a significant role in shaping cosmopolitan thought from the very beginning. Diogenes of Sinope was a Greek philosopher who became a legend, yet according to the few remaining sources on his life, he occupied a somewhat peripheral place in Greek society. Apocryphal stories have it that Diogenes was exiled from Sinope, his native city, and even sold into slavery: Menippus of Gadara, the Cynic satirist, “wrote a work on his capture by pirates

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and sale as a slave to Xenocrates in Corinth” (Bosman 2117). His offensive nickname dog “proved fitting to his rejection of societal norms and propriety for a life strictly ‘according to nature’” (Bosman 2117). The concept of self-sufficiency, at the heart of Diogenes’ cosmopolitanism, involves rejecting luxury, practising asceticism, and discarding social conventions and norms. In this sense, the Diogenian concept of world citizenship is the antithesis of contemporary global cosmopolitanism, which is often associated with mobility, affluence, and consumerism.

In line with Spencer’s approach, most accounts distinguish three main historical phases of the cosmopolitan worldview. First, the classical Greek and Roman period, marked by the Cynic and Stoic philosophers, is notable for the *Republic* of Diogenes, the *Republic* of Zeno the Cypriot, and Cicero’s *On Moral Duties* (*De Officiis*). Cosmopolitanism was envisioned as a utopian ideal in this period, since civilisation was considered incompatible with true virtue (Taraborelli x–xi). Second, cosmopolitanism gained influence among Christian thinkers, such as Saint Paul. As Christopher D. Stanley argues, “[t]he apostle Paul has been viewed by many as a cosmopolitan thinker who called Christ-followers to embrace the ideal of a single humanity living in harmony with a divinely ordered cosmos” (144). This view, nevertheless, differs significantly from the classical Greek concept, which is based on the idea that everyone should be invited to the ideal city. In contrast, Paul believed that only those devoted to Christ would share in the ideal world (Stanley 155). The third phase is marked by the above-mentioned Kantian turn, which gave a secular character to cosmopolitanism during the Enlightenment. Kant’s “Perpetual Peace” encouraged teachers to educate their students in “feelings of cosmopolitanism” in order to promote progress towards “a universal cosmopolitan condition” (Stanley 149). The idea even became the cultural basis of Western colonialism that sought to eradicate pagan customs in the name of the “civilising mission,” linking cosmopolitanism with “the Western colonial project in the minds of both colonisers and colonised” (Stanley 149). Although the term might “roughly” have the same colloquial meaning today as it had for its iconic representatives by the time of the Enlightenment, the discourse of cosmopolitanism moved substantially away from the Diogenian idea of “world citizenship.” In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as the era of historical empires came to an end and the world became more globalised and interconnected, new approaches emerged, all of which sought to address the blind spots of this discourse.

Critics often consider the 1990s a significant turning point in the history of cosmopolitanism, as the collapse of the Soviet Union and the growing influence of globalisation rekindled critical interest in the idea and its social viability (Stanley 151). However, the historical and cultural transformations that led to these new approaches occurred earlier. The collapse of historical empires following World War II led to mass migration from former colonies and Commonwealth countries to Western cities. Novels by migrant writers, such as Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) and Doris Lessing's *In Pursuit of the English* (1960), revealed alternative cosmopolitan experiences in London long before the 1990s (McLeod 24–58; Györke, “Stories” 168–169). Cultural theory began to address these new cosmopolitan visions somewhat later than literary works. As shown below, postcolonial and feminist critics began contributing to the discourse of new cosmopolitanism in the 1990s and after the turn of the millennium.

The idea of vernacular cosmopolitanism, discussed by Éva Pataki and Edit Gállá in this thematic cluster, has become the most influential alternative to Western cosmopolitanism in postcolonial studies. Introduced to academic discourse by Homi Bhabha and Sheldon Pollock in the mid-1990s, the term refers to non-standard language use, non-Western local cultures, and the experiences of refugees and underprivileged migrants in Western cities.¹ Vernacular cosmopolitanism also gained prominence through Stuart Hall's writings, who defined it as a cosmopolitanism “that is aware of the limitations of any one culture or any one identity” (30), but still showcases “the ability to stand outside of having one's life written and scripted by any community” (26). Bhabha understands vernacular cosmopolitanism as the opposite of global cosmopolitanism, which refers to a hegemonic variety based on cultural and financial privilege:

1 Bhabha first used this term to refer to the experience of disempowered migrants in his 1996 essay, “Unsatisfied: Notes on Vernacular Cosmopolitanism,” which he further developed in the “Preface to the Routledge Classical Edition” of *The Location of Culture* (2004). Sheldon Pollock, seemingly independently of Bhabha, also employed this concept to demonstrate how cosmopolitan ideals emerged from local, non-Western contexts in pre-modern South Asia in his 1996 and 1998 publications, “The Sanskrit Cosmopolis, 300–1300: Transculturation, Vernacularisation, and the Question of Ideology” (1996) and “The Cosmopolitan Vernacular” (1998).

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[Global cosmopolitanism] is a cosmopolitanism of relative prosperity and privilege founded on ideas of progress that are complicit with neo-liberal forms of governance and free-market forces of competition. Such a concept of global “development” has faith in the virtually boundless powers of technological innovation and global communications. . . . A global cosmopolitanism of this sort readily celebrates a world of plural cultures and peoples located at the periphery, so long as they produce healthy profit margins within metropolitan societies. (*Location* xiv)

The reference to neoliberalism, free-market competition, and the boundless power of technological innovation makes it clear that global cosmopolitanism is complicit with the material and economic interests of the Western elite. In contrast, vernacular cosmopolitanism “emerges from the world of migrant boarding houses and the habitations of national and diasporic minorities” (xvi) and insists on “a right to difference in equality” (xvii). In other words, vernacular cosmopolitanism focuses on the local and captures the lived experiences of those on the periphery, challenging hegemonic cosmopolitan visions. The significance of local cultural differences is also at the heart of Anthony Appiah’s view of cosmopolitanism,² explored by Éva Pataki and Ágnes Harasztsos in this thematic cluster.

Bhabha’s argument, to some extent, relies on poststructuralist reconceptualisations of cosmopolitanism; he refers to Julia Kristeva in particular, claiming that her notion of wounded cosmopolitanism has influenced his theory (*Location* xvii).³ Kristeva’s point that “by recognising [the stranger] within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself” (1) is indeed at the heart of cosmopolitan ethics—it is precisely the failure of this recognition that leads to the rejection of the “Other” in Bret Easton Ellis’s *The Informers* (1994), as Gálla’s article shows. Some new interpretations of cosmopolitanism, however, have moved away from the poststructuralist paradigm towards approaches that engage with the most pressing social and political questions of the twenty-first century. These approaches, not unlike other recent theoretical interventions that describe the new millennium

2 Appiah uses the term “partial cosmopolitanism” to outline a disposition that takes both local allegiances and “loyalty to all humanity” (xvi) into account.

3 See Kristeva’s *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991). For poststructuralist reconceptualisations of cosmopolitanism, see also Jacques Derrida’s *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (2001).

as “post-postmodern” or “metamodern,” point out that the postmodern discourse “has proven increasingly inapt and inept in coming to terms with our changed social situation” (Akker and Vermeulen 2). Therefore, they argue for a politically engaged, more hopeful, yet self-reflexive attitude in the twenty-first century, while rejecting postmodern playfulness and cynicism (Schrag 2019).

Reflecting on some of these social and political issues in “Cosmopolitanism, Religion, Diaspora” (2018), Susan Stanford Friedman argues for the need to explore the role of religion in shaping “new cosmopolitan” attitudes. Speaking from a feminist perspective, Friedman stresses the significance of religion in the formation of Muslim women’s cosmopolitan identities by claiming that “formulations of the new cosmopolitanism rarely discuss religion in any substantive way, let alone the particular way in which conflict over women’s bodies feature centrally” (203–204). Earlier feminist readings of cosmopolitanism did focus on the bodily experiences of women (Fitzgerald and Stevens 81; Vieten 3); however, these approaches were grounded in the secular understanding of feminism, overlooking questions of faith and spirituality.⁴ Religion, nevertheless, is especially significant in the diasporic context, since many contemporary migrants move from societies where religion is dominant into Western cities (Friedman 205). Focusing on the spiritual as an inherent aspect of new cosmopolitan identities, therefore, facilitates a more sophisticated understanding of the experience of vernacular cosmopolitanism as well.

Recently, scholars have started to explore the relevance of cosmopolitanism in the field of digital culture. Sandra Ponzanesi, for instance, has examined how digital connectivity influences the everyday lives of minorities, migrants, and refugees (1). She points out that, although digital networks offer new opportunities for migrants, the undesired effects of “data colonialism, algorithms of oppression, and biometric assemblage” (4) make digital cosmopolitanism hard to achieve. Thus, it needs to be recognised that “technology is never neutral or innocent” (5), and the “connectivity mantra” (5) may foster false hopes. One might also wonder how AI will transform digital cosmopolitanism in the contemporary world, as the use of language models not only helps non-native speakers express themselves fluently but also erases individual style and local differences.

4 On the impact of religion on Muslim women’s cosmopolitanism, see also Saleh Chaoui’s “Navigating the Religious in the Cosmopolitan” (2022).

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CASE STUDIES

The three case studies in this thematic cluster examine how contemporary English-language novels depict the manifold faces of cosmopolitanism. Edit Gállá's "Consumerism and Cosmopolitanism in Bret Easton Ellis's *The Informers*" explores Ellis's 1994 short story collection, set predominantly in Los Angeles during the 1980s. Ellis, author of *American Psycho* (1991), often depicts morally outrageous actions in his writing without any ethical judgment, which makes his fiction a fertile ground for exploring contemporary cosmopolitanism. Relying on Baudrillard's theory of consumer society, Gállá argues that his stories stage "a banal form of culturalist cosmopolitanism and a savagely competitive consumerism." Ellis's characters are privileged, global cosmopolitans, dulled by the multicultural environment of California. Although they are exposed to a sizable Latino population in Los Angeles, they are unable to see the racial "other": the consumerism that dominates this world leads to the commodification of human beings and values.

Gállá relies on Vincenzo Cicchelli and Sylvie Octobre's notion of "aesthetico-cultural cosmopolitanism" to describe the consumerist mindset of Ellis's characters. In her reading, this type of cosmopolitanism refers to varied cultural influences, including fashion, the cult of the body, and youth culture, for instance. In Cicchelli and Octobre's interpretation, "aesthetico-cultural cosmopolitanism" involves a genuine sense of "curiosity and interest towards products and practices whose aesthetic and cultural codes are situated outside of an individual's national aesthetic canon and cultural corpus" (6). In Gállá's article, however, culturalist cosmopolitanism refers to an uncritical and self-centred practice. Through the close reading of several short stories from the collection, Gállá's analysis demonstrates how this shallow cosmopolitan attitude precludes the emergence of ethical cosmopolitanism: characters in *The Informers* show no genuine interest in other cultures; they only consume signs of otherness in order to underscore their sense of cultural superiority.

Ágnes Harasztsos's "Places of Absence: Cosmopolitan Agencies in the Fictional Budapest of post-1989 British Novels" focuses on two English-language novels that depict Hungary during and shortly after the Cold War: Tibor Fischer's *Under the Frog* (1992) and Malcolm Bradbury's *Doctor Criminale* (1992).⁵ Harasztsos points out that Fischer's novel reflects on Soviet-style internationalism, which was part of communist

5 For a comparative analysis of *Doctor Criminale* with Bruce Chatwin's *Utz* (1988) and Tom McCarthy's *Men in Space* (2007), see Harasztsos's "The 'Postmodern Baroque.'"

ideology during the Cold War, while *Doctor Criminale* shows how the region is imagined as an exoticised tourist destination after the fall of the wall. Both novels contrast contemporary realities with a pre-war cosmopolitan vision of Budapest. This cosmopolitan perspective, Harasztsos argues, is associated with places of absence: passages that describe bleak urban areas allude to the time of the Austro–Hungarian Monarchy, for instance, evoking the period when Budapest was indeed a bustling cosmopolitan metropolis.

This rich and insightful reading draws on versatile theoretical concepts, ranging from Homi Bhabha’s “sly civility” to Madina Tlostanova’s “tempolocality.”⁶ From cosmopolitan theory, Harasztsos applies Appiah’s notion of “partial cosmopolitanism” to explore the answer local characters give to global narratives, including both communist internationalism in *Under the Frog* and post-1989 touristic cosmopolitanism in *Doctor Criminale*. She reads the 1956 Revolution depicted in Fischer’s novel as an example of partial cosmopolitanism, and claims that, apart from this moment of radical rupture, there is no genuine cosmopolitan agency in these novels.

Éva Pataki’s “Becoming a Cosmopolite: Identity Construction and The Cosmopolitan Imagination in Isabella Hammad’s *The Parisian*” investigates how the main character of Hammad’s novel constructs a cosmopolitan identity through the transnational migration he performs. *The Parisian*, published in 2019, is the debut novel of the British–Palestinian writer, who grew up in London. According to Jehanne Moharram, the narrative is historically inspired fiction, which draws upon the story of Hammad’s grandfather: the main character, Midhat, leaves his hometown, Nablus, part of the Ottoman Empire at that time, and moves to France to pursue his studies. Pataki investigates the protagonist’s lived experiences in various cities (including Constantinople, Montpellier, Paris, Cairo, and Nablus), as well as the affective qualities of these places, and argues that Midhat becomes a “local citizen of the world” in the novel. Relying on Bhabha’s concept of “vernacular cosmopolitanism” and Orlando Wood’s notion of “affective cosmopolitanism,” Pataki points out that Midhat accepts “his right to difference by learning through bodily engagement.” Her article can be read to suggest that the affective, non-verbal dimension of the cosmopolitan experience is as significant in understanding this phenomenon as its more tangible expressions.

6 See Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* (2004) and Madina Tlostanova’s *Postcolonialism and Postsocialism in Fiction and Art* (2017).

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These studies demonstrate that cosmopolitanism indeed has many faces, ranging from shallow, consumerist attitudes to deep, ethical commitments. The articles also reveal that the subject continues to attract scholarly attention. Although numerous critics have argued for the need to rethink the significance of cosmopolitanism over the past few decades, the academic field still has its blind spots, particularly when specific local contexts are explored in relation to the global flow of ideas. It is not only the postcolonial condition and diasporic realities that make it inevitable to propose new alternatives to hegemonic models; in Central and Eastern Europe, too, further research is needed to understand how literature produced in the region reflects on the local cosmopolitan paradigms that have emerged since 1989. We hope this thematic cluster will serve as an inspiration for such projects as well.

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