

What Does it Mean to be a “True Cosmopolitan”? A Critical Reading of ‘Everyday Talk’ About Other People

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Abstract

The cosmopolitan has become an increasingly popular figure within the social sciences as scholars try to theorise new forms of experience and sociability in an era of rapid globalisation. Unfortunately, much of this work has generated either normative prescriptions or naïve conclusions on the basis of one-off empirical studies. In the latter case, there is sometimes a failure to acknowledge the rhetorical aspects of much routine discussion, most notably the processes by which individuals undertake forms of impression management when discussing their relations with different groups. Alternatively, drawing on my own empirical data, I offer a more innovative approach by using Billig et al.’s concept of “ideological dilemmas” (1988) as a means of examining normative statements about other people. Finally, I suggest that the idea of a pure cosmopolitan, divorced from more local concerns and allegiances needs to be replaced with a more nuanced account that focuses on questions of context and degrees of engagement.