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Other People

Michael Skey

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

Michael Skey

Department of Media and Communications London School of Economics and
Political Science

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.

1 Introduction

One of the key features of the contemporary era is the rise in global mobility. Travel and tourism has become the largest industry in the world, accounting for 12% of world GDP, with the growth in international passenger numbers rocketing from 25 million in 1950 to around 750 million some 50 years later (Urry, 2002: 5). Combined with these movements in people is the associated growth in flows of products, images and ideas across international borders. Unsurprisingly, these striking shifts have been increasingly tracked and debated by academics across a range of disciplines as they try to make sense of the impacts, and implications, of what has been labelled as a “borderless world” (Beck, 2006). In particular, the idea of the cosmopolitan, one who is ‘open’ to other people and cultures, has become the subject of renewed interest as attempts are made to understand (the significance of) forms of experience that extend beyond local or national contexts.

While much of this work has been theoretically stimulating, it has tended towards normative prescriptions or rather naïve conclusions on the basis of one-off empirical studies. In the former case, discussions have been rather abstract in nature, often failing to define exactly what openness means *in practice* and which ‘others’ are being engaged with. In the latter, where interviews generally are the primary method of data collection, there is sometimes a failure to acknowledge the rhetorical and contradictory aspects of much routine everyday discussion. That is, individuals draw on a range of sometimes conflicting arguments according to the context and their needs.

Paying closer to attention to these sorts of theoretical and methodological issues is important. This is because it takes us beyond merely noting the ‘potentialities’ of novel patterns of global interconnectedness (Moore, 2004). We can more effectively assess the extent to which these transformations are generating increasing interactions between different people and also *new* forms of sociability and community that may be both meaningful and durable. In other words, whether the contemporary era is one where previous allegiances and identities (national, religious, local etc.) are being rendered obsolete as engagements with difference generate novel forms of political organisation, cultural interaction and social relations.

To provide a context for the analysis of this question, the first part of this paper examines themes within writing on cosmopolitanism and some of the criticisms that are directed at this work. These discussions are then illustrated by exploring in some detail the results of an empirical study of “ordinary cosmopolitanisms” (Lamont & Aksartova, 2002). Subsequently, a more “sceptical reading” (Gill, 2000: 178) is offered, paying attention to the contradictory aspects of these examples of ‘everyday’ talk, as a means of examining the normative statements that were made about other people.

Finally, using data from my recent research project, I argue that we need to focus on those moments when individuals utilise particular arguments as a means of understanding whether, when and why a more cosmopolitan perspective may be articulated. The idea of a pure cosmopolitan, divorced from local concerns and allegiances is rejected and replaced with a more nuanced approach that focuses on questions of context and degrees of engagement.

2 Theorising Cosmopolitanism

The recent upsurge in writing about cosmopolitanism within the social sciences belies a long-standing, though intermittent, interest in the subject dating back to the Stoics and, thereafter, most closely associated with the work of Immanuel Kant (Pollock et al., 2000:585). Kant’s cosmopolitan philosophy, which outlined a range of normative principles based on the (presumed) values shared by ‘citizens of the world’ (Vertovec & Cohen, 2002: 10), has also re-emerged in contemporary works (cf Nussbaum, 1996, Appiah, 2006). However, it is the growing intensity of global movements, flows and interactions that has placed the cosmopolitan subject at the forefront of much recent socio-political theorising as scholars attempt to map new forms of trade, media, politics and sociality that by-pass or move beyond a local or national framework. Therefore alongside a philosophical world-view (Vertovec & Cohen, 2002: 1), cosmopolitanism is increasingly analysed as a “socio-cultural condition”, “a political project”, “an attitude or disposition” and a set of practices or competencies (ibid: 8-14).

In these formulations, cosmopolitanism is broadly defined as “a willingness to engage with the other” (Hannerz, 1996: 103) or as a general “openness to other people and

cultures” (Szerszynski & Urry, 2002: 470). This is linked to the activities of particular privileged groups, whose access to greater economic, cultural and political resources enables them to move more freely “within the socio-economic circuits of the global economy” (Thompson & Tambyah, 1999: 228). This not only includes the global elite of “cosmocrats” (Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 2000: 229) who promote - and benefit most - from economic globalisation, but also “middling migrants” (Wiles, 2007) who are willing and able to travel around the globe, generally on a semi-permanent basis for career development opportunities and/or travel and pleasure.

Yet as Ulrich Beck has passionately argued, foregrounding the idea that “cosmopolitanism is a conscious and voluntary choice ... [largely associated with] elites” tends to overlook the “*unintended and lived* cosmopolitanism[s ... that emerge] ... primarily [as] a function of coerced choices or a side-effect of unconscious decisions” (2000a: 7). This includes the “minor cosmopolitan[ism]” (Silverstone, 2001: 17) of those who struggle to escape poverty, environmental degradation or civil strife and whose engagements with ‘otherness’ are far less likely to be on their own terms (Werbner, 1999).

Put simply, these theories attempt to sketch a framework for understanding whether, and in what ways, the increasing intensity of global flows is generating new forms of meaning-making, imagination and belonging or what Roland Robertson calls a “globalisation in the head” (1992). The significance of these arguments, in both drawing attention to the ‘potentialities’ of new patterns of global interconnectedness (Moore, 2004) and opening up fresh avenues for theorising social relations that move beyond the nation (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002, Beck, 2006), must, however, be balanced by acknowledging a number of limitations.

3 Problematising the ‘cosmopolitan imagination’

First, a great deal of the writing about cosmopolitanism tends to operate in rather prescriptive terms, privileging a “progressive humanistic ideal” (Skrbis et al., 2004: 116) over more parochial allegiances (cf Nussbaum, 1996). However, the concept is poorly defined and openness towards others is so vague as to be almost meaningless. There also is a tendency to promote or celebrate the ideal without first evidencing its resonance as a lived social category. In other words, “abstract utopian

value[s]” (Skrbis et al., 2004: 115) do not tend to offer much theoretical purchase when dealing with the generally messy, often unequal and sometimes bloody, business of everyday life. As Craig Calhoun has argued, much of the writing on cosmopolitanism fails to offer a “strong account of social solidarity or of the role of culture in constituting human life” (2003: 535).

A further limitation concerns the distinction that needs to be made between practices and their meaning(s). For while many have outlined impressive macro or structural features concerning, say, global travel or trading, less attention has been paid to their (perceived) impacts at the micro-level and, in particular, what they might mean to different individuals (Although see, for useful empirical studies, Kong, 1999, Saunders, 2006. Skrbis & Woodward, 2007, Wiles, 2007). In other words, subsuming different activities – travelling overseas, eating exotic foods, working alongside ‘foreign’ colleagues, listening to ‘world music’ – among disparate individuals under the banner term of ‘cosmopolitanism’ does not tell us much about the significance of these practices and whether they are, indeed, transforming, challenging or rendering obsolete existing ways of living (Calhoun, 2003: 532).

Finally, in this paper I want to draw attention to the problematics of studying cosmopolitanism in practice by focusing on the dynamics of the research process itself. In particular, the idea that individuals manage the ways in which they present themselves within research settings will be addressed and reflected upon. While this is an issue that all researchers who study aspects of ‘everyday’ life need to take into account (Morrison, 1998: 184-190), it may be particularly significant for those who want to explore the ways in which research subjects discuss their relations with ‘other’ people in semi-public fora.

In the remaining sections of this paper, I explore some of these issues and their implications in more detail, first, by outlining the results of an empirical study of “ordinary cosmopolitanisms” (Lamont and Aksartova, 2002) which offers a useful starting point¹.

¹ In singling out this study, I am not dismissing the authors’ work, but instead using it to raise important theoretical and methodological issues

4 Ordinary Cosmopolitanisms

Lamont and Aksartova's work is important here because it is both empirically grounded and an attempt to move beyond the idea that cosmopolitanism is an elite phenomenon linked to mobility. They focus on "the strategies used by ordinary people to bridge boundaries with people who are different from them" (ibid: 1).

The study is based on the results of a series of interviews with "college-educated white and black workers in the United States (US) and white and North African workers in France" (ibid). Interviewees were asked to talk about "the types of people they feel superior and inferior to, and the types of people they describe as 'their sort of folks'" (ibid: 3). The analysis points to the fact that while interviewees on both sides of the Atlantic "use broad principles of inclusion, which ... transcend group identities of ascribed characteristics ... [they] draw on very different cultural resources" (ibid: 3). In the case of the US, almost all those interviewed referenced "work, earning capacity and consumption" as a means of forging links between different people (ibid: 4). Religion, citizenship and humanity were also discussed in relation to this issue, but only by African-Americans.

In France, ideas about competence and market values were largely eschewed in favour of discussions based around "the principles of solidarity and ... egalitarianism" (ibid: 11). The authors argue that their interviewees, in focusing on "fundamental human sameness, ... behave as *true cosmopolitans* ... stating their rejection of xenophobia and a commitment to tolerance" (my emphasis, ibid: 18).

Mapping the processes by which 'ordinary people' draw on (and hence constitute) more cosmopolitan discourse in their everyday lives provides crucial theoretical insights in/to a globalising world and a powerful counter-weight to the all too prevalent discussions about social cohesion, clashes of civilisations and (the problems of) multi-culturalism in places such as Britain, the US and France (Huntingdon, 1996, Phillips, 2006).

Unfortunately, there is a tendency in these works to draw broad-based conclusions from specific examples whilst also failing to adequately account for the means by which the data is generated and analysed. In the next section, I lend weight to these

critiques by examining some of the statements used to provide evidence of cosmopolitan attitudes among ordinary people in the US and France.

5 People are people

One of the most important features of Lamont and Aksartova's study is their identification of the "types of evidence used by the .. groups under consideration to show that we are the same" (ibid: 3). They usefully point to the different cultural repertoires employed by American and French workers and, also, suggest that the wider range of anti-racist arguments used by non-whites is linked to the experience of racial stereotyping in their daily lives (ibid: 10). I suggest, however, that the identification of these differences should not merely be used to highlight (and celebrate) the "contrasted ways of conceiving how to build bridges between 'us' and 'them'" (ibid: 17) but also their possible limitations and contradictions. To stretch the construction analogy further, we need to ask what kinds of bridges are being built? Who are they designed to connect? We need to take into account the immediate context and the extent to which these bridging structures are permanently erected or, subsequently, withdrawn in response to new circumstances.

For instance, the following statements are indicative of the fairly narrow range of arguments made by white interviewees who generally emphasise the importance of judging individuals, not the social groups they represent.

"People are people ... There's good whites, there's bad whites"

"There are blacks and there are niggers. There are whites and there is white trash"
(2002: 4-5)

"... they are people who work and who are serious. These are people that I like and have respect for ... and for me, whether they are black or yellow or red, it is the same thing" (ibid: 12)

On the face of it these are all classic liberal statements and Lamont and Aksartova interpret them as such, claiming that they express the "universality of human nature" (ibid: 6). Yet, as Wetherell and Potter suggest, a focus on the individual as the source

of either tolerance or prejudice must be seen as a particular rhetorical strategy which puts forward the idea that “racial harmony comes from the considerate and unbiased treatment of all fellow human beings” (1992: 209).

Not only does this vision of tolerance presume a society of equals, it also underplays structural considerations and, as a result, focuses attention on “changing people’s attitudes rather than modes of social organisation” (ibid: 210). Furthermore, most appeals to toleration are non-egalitarian, “resting in some way on a distinction between majority norms and minority deviance, and incorporating some implied preference for a particular way of life” (Phillips, 1994: 79).

Therefore, while these types of statements indicate an adherence to processes of bridge building at the explicit level, they might also be viewed as a particular strategy of members of a dominant group, positioning themselves against possible accusations of prejudice. This is not to argue that such expressions are deliberate obfuscations or the work of avowed racists posing as liberals. It simply suggests that apparently clear-cut statements need to be carefully scrutinised in terms of “the[ir] contrary or dilemmatic aspects” (Billig et al., 1988: 20). Furthermore, these deeper or implicit counter-themes can only be understood in relation to the context in which they are uttered; in this case, the peculiar dynamics of a (relatively) formal interview setting.

In the next section, I draw on the concept of ideological dilemmas (Billig et al., 1988) as a means of introducing a critical edge into the analysis of these types of discussions.

6 Dilemmatic thinking

In their study of ideological dilemmas, Michael Billig and his colleagues (1988) draw attention to the contradictions that people must deal with as they puzzle over and argue about their lives. This “stress upon argumentation and the dilemmatic aspects of common sense” (ibid: 19) rejects the idea that individuals strive for consistency in their thoughts and, instead, focuses attention on the ways in which people attempt to manage (potential) counter-arguments and, in the process, present their own views as rational and disinterested. The authors suggest that by focusing on both the

explicit and implicit aspects of argumentation it may be possible to examine how “contrary themes of social knowledge are revealed in everyday discourse” (ibid: 21).

Of particular relevance here, is the suggestion that ideas about prejudice and tolerance are drawn together in a dialectical relationship, with the latter underpinned by long-standing Enlightenment ideals concerning rationality, objectivity and equality (ibid: 100-106). As Wetherell and Potter observe, in modern liberal democracies such as Britain and the US, dilemmas concerning prejudice and tolerance are often discussed in relation to race and ethnicity (1992: 203). Moreover, in these places post-Enlightenment values of fraternity and equality still operate as a normative ‘trump card’, meaning that more parochial views must be carefully formulated and justified as reasonable. As Billig et al. contend, “an ambivalence is to be expected between the universalism of Enlightenment themes and the particularism of [parochial] ones, with the latter needing to avoid the taint of ‘prejudice’ as defined by the former” (1988: 105).

It is with reference to this argument that the idea of impression management becomes particularly salient and can be used to guide, or, at least, to inform our analyses of ‘everyday talk’ about other people².

7 Accounting for context

If, in places such as the US and France, talk about ‘Others’ is often shaped, or at least, framed, by a normative idea that stresses fraternity over more parochial concerns what might that mean for a research study looking to directly probe such issues? First, while individuals are, of course, able to move beyond or challenge any such ideals as they see fit, it seems likely that any concerns about the ‘taint of prejudice’ might operate more in some circumstances than others and that the

² The idea of impression management is perhaps most associated with the work of the sociologist, Erving Goffman (1971), who focused on the performative aspects of everyday interactions. He argued “that when an individual presents her or himself, s/he will usually have an objective and will be concerned to control others’ responses to this self-presentation” (O’Sullivan, 2005: 726). In particular, Goffman drew attention to the importance of context in defining what is appropriate behaviour for particular individuals at any given time (Goffman, 1971: 45). This idea can be usefully applied to the research interview as a means of understanding how “the norms that exist in a setting can work to limit how a person ... participate[s] in debate and discussion” (O’Sullivan, 2005: 728).

presence of academic strangers within an interview setting might lead to views that challenge a liberal norm being more carefully managed³.

It should be noted at this juncture that Lamont and Aksartova do acknowledge, in a footnote, that “interviewees often present facework and downplay racial prejudice when *explicitly* questioned on racism” (my emphasis, 2002: 21) and, as a result, suggest that a more indirect form of questioning be adopted. However, given the conclusions that are drawn (and validated) in their study, I suggest that the ramifications of asking strangers from a different social background to state who they feel superior/inferior to, need to be addressed in more detail.

It is here, in particular, that the question of “moderator demand” (Morrison, 1998: 184) is put forward. This refers to the idea that participants will try to modify their views or opinions in the presence of a stranger/authority figure, notably, with regard to controversial subjects or, alternatively, try to gauge what it is they ‘think’ the moderator wants to hear. For the question of facework or impression management applies as much to indirect questions as it does to those that specifically address racism, given that we are dealing with a semi-public social setting often involving marked differences between participants in terms of social status, educational background and expectations.

In arguing that a more formal interview setting is likely to produce increasingly measured responses or attempts to manage ‘prejudiced’ views as a means of projecting reasonableness (Billig et al, 1988: 114), I am not suggesting that interviews cannot be used to elicit a range of interesting discussions, even from those who might seem less comfortable in such surroundings. However, by acknowledging the significance of the interview context, we are encouraged to focus on the processes by which individuals *may* manage their impression and, in turn, explore in more detail the contradictory or “dilemmatic aspects of social beliefs” (Billig et al., 1988: 20). Returning to the earlier statement by whites concerning the need to treat individuals equally, it may be possible to offer a more sceptical reading if closer attention is paid to the ways in which such formulations are employed, consistently or otherwise, in relation to different topics and/or ‘Others’. That is, to use an earlier

³ Of course, there are some who will openly express their feelings no matter the presence of ‘academic’ strangers or, indeed, even delight in challenging the (presumed) ‘liberal’ sensibilities of the interviewer(s) (Back, 2007).

analogy, to observe when bridges are both built and dismantled, in relation to whom and at which moments.

This points to a second issue, which concerns the need to manage the extent of our claims when discussing processes of identification. This may require introducing an element of conditionality⁴ into analyses, whether in relation to more cosmopolitan identities or, indeed, those that continue to articulate symbolic boundaries between 'them' and 'us'.

8 Conditional cosmopolitans?

For example, if we accept the claim that white working-class people employing a 'people are people' formulation can be defined as "attempts to build bridges between 'us' and 'them'" (Lamont & Aksartova, 2002: 17), I would also suggest that we need to ask two further questions; who exactly are the 'us' and 'them' being talked about and what is the extent of these commitments.

In the first case, I am not persuaded by the idea that white working-class people in the US and France, in rejecting racial characteristics in favour of shared earning capacity or consumption patterns can then be used to make the assertion that the interviewees are "demonstrat[ing] their commitment to the community of humankind" (ibid). Part of the problem may be that in studying talk about race through the "prism of cosmopolitanism" (ibid: 19), the authors are making the data do too much work so that bridges built between racial 'others' are suddenly extended to humanity as a whole. In most of these cases, the interviewees are talking about local or national contexts and, often, *draw* boundaries on the basis of religion and nation.

This takes us back to the earlier problem of defining cosmopolitanism beyond the rather nebulous idea of an engagement with 'otherness' (Skrbis et al., 2004: 123). Although there is no space here to address the manifold debates on 'otherness' within social theory, it is worth noting that it has been employed on a variety of different scales ranging from the individual (cf Mead, 1967) to empires and civilisations (Said, 1985, 1994). Much of the literature on cosmopolitanism has

⁴ This is an idea developed in discussion with Professor Lilie Chouliaraki (See, for example, Chouliaraki, 2008).

focused on increasing engagements between different national 'others', as global flows are seen to threaten previously stable national formations and solidarities. Yet even within a national setting people engage with many different forms of 'otherness' on a daily basis, with some being seen as meaningful and others largely irrelevant.

Therefore, the question is not of difference per se but when and why differences (however constituted) are used to inform particular representations and actions and how these may be changing over time in relation to wider externalities. For instance, discussions about the need for tighter controls of immigration may render class and regional differences irrelevant in favour of those defined in national terms (McLaren & Johnson, 2007). Alternatively, class allegiances, in the form of taste, education and outlook, may operate far more effectively in joining together particular groups in places such as London and New York than national differences, which then become significantly underplayed (cf Kennedy, 2004).

9 What difference does difference make?

Lumping together the following statements under the collective heading of a "commitment to universals" (Lamont & Aksartova, 2002: 2) does not really enable us to explore how different individuals make sense of, and articulate, their relations with (meaningful) 'others' at a particular time and place.

"No matter who you are Exxon, you're making pretty good money ... You do not see the division or whatever, so Exxon kind of eliminated that [the issue of racial difference] because of the salary structure" (ibid: 4)

"Everyone goes to get break at the bakery for dinner, ... whether you are Arab or French. Everyone is the same, it is the same thing" (ibid: 14)

"I claim allegiance to America because it's the only country I know ... America is built on opportunity for each and every different type of race that came through this place" (ibid: 9)

Leaving aside the many fascinating micro-features of each extract, the first downplays the significance of (racial) differences within a local context while an

explicit national framework underpins the second two. Each individual may be building bridges but they are very different structures designed to achieve particular ends. This is not to dismiss their importance but perhaps to see these statements as indicating partial or contingent forms of 'openness' that are defined and articulated in relation to existing racial and national frameworks.

Therefore, the question of openness and to whom must be investigated empirically and, in the case of cosmopolitanism, backed by a guiding set of attributes that can be used to effectively mark the parameters of the concept (Skrbis et al., 2004: 123). Only in this way, can we assess the degree to which current global transformations are transforming people's attitudes and dispositions as they engage with new forms of meaningful difference on an increasingly routine basis.

The second issue, concerning the extent of these commitments to cosmopolitanism, again encourages us to acknowledge the fact that individuals draw on a changing repertoire of discursive resources as they move through their lives. These are dependent on context, available material and social resources, individual objectives and so on. In other words, it is helpful to scale down the types of claims being made in these situations by drawing on the idea of conditionality. In this way, each expression can be explicitly linked to a particular context so as to determine when, how and, perhaps, why people draw on particular discourses, whether anti-racist, national, religious or cosmopolitan.

This type of approach defines discourses as established frameworks for "understanding and interpreting experience ... [or] making sense of the world", which inform how individuals think about and act towards others, (Brubaker et al., 2006: 207). In the case of cosmopolitanism, it echoes the arguments of Skrbis and Woodward who write, "we see cosmopolitanism as a cultural outlook that is deployed and retracted ... These dispositions a[re] flexible, and sometimes contradictory. They are discursive, practical resources available to social actors to deal with emergent, everyday global agendas and issues ... Yet we do not see cosmopolitan values expressed fully, or at all times and on all issues" (2007: 735).

In the next section, I outline how this perspective might be employed by examining examples from a group interview I carried out as part of a research project investigating the articulation of social identities among the white English in England.

10 Mapping discursive shifts in everyday talk

In relation to my own group interviews, I tried to adopt “a ‘wait-and-listen’ approach to see how and when” particular discursive resources were employed and debated by individuals (Fox & Miller-Idriss, forthcoming). Questions were devised to be as broad as possible. The main part of the interview was designed to prompt broad discussions about the state of the country; what people dis/liked about living ‘here’, what had changed and so on. More specifically, those focusing on globalisation included; where people had travelled to, if they had friends or family living abroad, whether they, or people they knew, were more mobile than in the past and, if so, whether these shifts were seen to be meaningful.

The following illustrative examples come from a group based in Newcastle, England, which consisted of two, middle-class, married couples aged between 40-50. The first extract was preceded by one of the men (John) talking about his experience at university living on the same street as a number of Asian families. John comments that initially it was “quite difficult” but that over a period of time he and his friends got to know their neighbours and eventually got “on talking terms with them”. As a result of this, he was able to observe the ‘commonalities’ they shared which included “certain moral standards” and a respect for the “family thing”. Lesley, drawing on this notion of commonalities, offers the following comment:

Lesley: I think John’s sort of touched on, what, what ... um ... my opinion is, ‘cos I, I kind of think, y’know, culture and race and all that sort of thing are a bit of a red herring, y’know ... And ... um ... I think for every people the world over, I think people are, that people are people and I do not know think they’re that different ... um ... wherever they are.

By drawing on the “traditions of universalism” (Billig et al., 1988: 36), Lesley is able to portray herself as disinterested and largely removed from more narrow forms of parochialism. The use of the well-worn terms “red herring” (commonly understood as an attempt to divert attention away from an issue) and “people are people” (an intertextually rich cliché) are particularly significant in categorizing Lesley (note the repetition of “I think”) as someone who can move beyond sectional interests. Indeed, this type of statement echoes some of those referenced by Lamont and Aksartova as a means of demonstrating how individuals build bridges with ‘others’. But to take this

statement at face value ignores both the wider group dynamics and the degree to which individuals shift between discourses as they make sense of, and debate, particular, sometimes, contradictory issues.

For example, shortly after this initial statement was made, the following exchange took place between Lesley, her husband Geoff and Alison (John's husband) which points to the dilemmatic nature of everyday conversations.

Geoff: But ... what I'm saying is, if you had 10 people in the same room and five of them were American and five of them were British then the Americans may go one way and the British go the other, that's where it's quite interesting ...

Lesley: But one's not any better than the other is it, so, why would, why would ... um ... your ... where you come from makes no difference.

Geoff: (Laughs) Where you come from makes no difference but it does help you ...

Alison .. influence ...

Geoff: .. understand why you're here and why you do what you do, does not it? We're getting very ethereal, oh dear ... we've changed the, we've changed the direction of the conversation.

Here two people are drawing on competing discourses in order to account for individual motivations and actions. Geoff argues that national traits are important because they can help one understand why people behave as they do, while Lesley draws on a more cosmopolitan discourse, which emphasizes commonalities over difference.

As I have argued above, the cosmopolitan discourse that Lesley articulates is the more socially acceptable position to hold, notably for middle-class liberals in a place such as England (cf Billig et al., 1988: 101-106). Therefore, this is also a useful example of the ways in which individuals are required to manage dilemmas when debating an issue. As his wife has adopted the more 'enlightened' perspective, Geoff attempts to manage his own arguments as a means of inoculating himself against any potential accusations of prejudice.

First, he suggests that national differences may be “quite interesting” before (laughingly) agreeing with his wife by repeating her statement. He then posits a question as a means of seeking agreement for his own position and finally defuses the situation by claiming that they have moved away from a rational discussion by “getting very ethereal”. As a result, what we see is the “general concern to avoid the imputation of a stake – that is, of a potentially prejudicial interested perspective” (Condor, 2000: 187).

11 “We never liked the French, did we?”

Lesley’s adoption of a cosmopolitan framework *in this context* is interesting in and of itself but also because in presenting herself as above any narrow-minded beliefs, she forces those she is interacting with to carefully formulate their own claims. However, individuals are more than able to shift between discourses and this may involve them adopting contradictory positions as they struggle to make sense of particular issues. For instance, contrast Lesley’s articulation of a more cosmopolitan discourse above with the following extract, uttered in the context of a wider debate about Europe:

Lesley: I think it goes back to the, sort of ... of like attracting like does not it? There’s more, there’s more in common with America, I mean, we never liked the French did we?

(GENERAL LAUGHTER)

John: Well, some people do.

Lesley: Well (unclear) I do like them, I do like the French but I think they’re jolly odd. Y’know, when you, when you consider how, I mean, they’re on the doorstep but really, y’know, very little in common considering, y’know, America is what, five hours away, y’know, you can go to America and, y’know, sort of, y’know, absorb all, y’know, their lifestyle no problem. But you go to France and it’s a different world altogether.

This extract shows the same individual drawing on a national discourse, utilising a number of micro-linguistic features such as deixis⁵ and metonymy that transform nations into concrete, unified entities, articulated in terms of traits ('they're jolly odd') and practices ('their lifestyle') (Wodak, 2006). Furthermore, what Lesley is trying to make sense of here is the (perceived) contrast between the physical distance and the 'cultural' distance that separates Britain from the US and France, respectively. Drawing on a national discourse enables her to resolve this particular conundrum, in the process, employing a whole raft of realist language that constructs powerful symbolic boundaries between national in and out-groups.

The extent to which Lesley struggles to articulate her position, evidenced by the number of false starts and hesitations, is also of interest here. This type of repair work, no doubt in response to John's comment and the general laughter, is again aimed at deflecting any possible accusations of prejudice, thereby tempering the effect of her initial comment about 'the French'.

Therefore, while the first two extracts indicate that individuals are able (and willing) to draw on a cosmopolitan discourse as part of their everyday lives, we need to go beyond simply noting this. There should be a greater focus on context and the rhetorical strategies that people adopt as they engage in social interactions. In this case, it might be argued that the more 'enlightened perspective' that Lesley adopts is not only socially desirable but also does not cost anything in terms of managing her stake. When she is dealing with an issue that matters to her own sense of self, her category group's relations with different 'Others', it is an embedded and accessible national framework that is used "as a means of knowing and evaluating others" (Hearn, 2007: 666).

⁵ Deixis involves a form of rhetorical pointing where the meaning of certain common words or phrases can only be established in relation to the immediate context. For example, the terms 'we' or 'us' might be used to refer to a particular family, trade unionists or humanity, as a whole, depending on the setting and position of the speaker/writer. In daily news reportage, even such apparently banal phrases as '*the* weather' or '*the* government' tend to indicate a taken-for-granted national context, where weather maps are defined in relation to national borders and the actions of governments are identified in terms of their relevance to national audiences (Billig, 1995: 105-109).

12 Conclusions

The subject of the cosmopolitan has proved to be increasingly popular in recent social scientific writing both as a means of theorizing social relations in an increasingly interconnected world and as offering a platform for thinking about more global forms of progressive politics. Many of these theoretical interventions have pointed to macro-level features, such as increasing global trade and mobility, to posit both a new era of human relations and the concomitant need for fresh sociological concepts with which to study them (cf Urry, 1999).

However, the significance of these discussions is sometimes undermined by a number of weaknesses. First, there is an inability or unwillingness to define the analytical dimensions of the concept so that it becomes discussed in terms, such as openness or an engagement with difference, that are so vague as to be meaningless. This is particularly problematic for those interested in understanding whether, where and how new forms of solidarity and identification that move beyond local or national frameworks are emerging. Second, it incorporates a strong sense of “political utopianism” (Skrbis et al., 2004: 132) that overlooks both the importance of existing social solidarities and the degree to which individuals have always lived with ‘difference’, whether defined in terms of class, region, race, age, gender etc. Third, where scholars have attempted to trace these developments empirically, there is a tendency to overlook methodological constraints and offer broad (and sometimes naïve) conclusions on the basis of limited data sets.

In this paper, I addressed some of these limitations by arguing that the concept of ideological dilemmas enables us to acknowledge the normative framework that underpins talk about ‘other people’ in places such as the US and Britain. Application of the concept enables us to probe more effectively interview and ethnographic data. Second, I suggested that, rather than simply identifying moments when individuals build bridges between ‘others’, we should focus on the context of these utterances or practices, those involved and the degree to which these ‘bridges’ remain in place, notably, in relation to new stimuli.

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EDS Innovation Research Programme
London School of Economics & Political Science
Lionel Robbins Building
Houghton Street
London WC2A 2AE
020 7955 7285
www.lse.ac.uk/eds