The idea of critical cosmopolitanism

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This chapter aims to set out the case for the idea of critical cosmopolitanism as a distinctive kind of cosmopolitanism. The notion of critical cosmopolitanism suggests a particular approach to cosmopolitanism that highlights its primarily critical characteristics. The critical thrust of cosmopolitanism has not always been emphasized by theorists of cosmopolitanism who have instead stressed its normative aspirations. Cosmopolitanism is certainly an approach to social and political analysis that is strongly normative and while views differ as to the scope and nature of its normativity, a cosmopolitan approach will inevitably tend towards a critical as opposed to an affirmative view of current realities. I argue that cosmopolitanism suggests a critical attitude which can be contrasted to an interpretive or descriptive approach to the social world and which is also more than normative critique. The notion of critical cosmopolitanism that I argue for aims to retain the notion of normative critique, but to extend it in the direction of a deeper notion of critique as world disclosure.

I hope to elucidate the critical presuppositions of cosmopolitanism. However, my aim is to go beyond an account of the critical nature of cosmopolitanism in general to a defence of the idea of a critical cosmopolitanism, as a particular kind of cosmopolitanism. As I shall attempt to demonstrate, this can be understood in two senses. A case could be made for critical cosmopolitanism simply as a critique of other conceptions of cosmopolitanism. While I argue this is an important aspect to critical cosmopolitanism, one can make a stronger claim for critical cosmopolitanism as an account of social and political reality that seeks to identify transformational possibilities within the present.

In the first section I discuss some of the key defining features of critique, taking in particular the conception of critique associated with the Hegelian Marxist and critical theory heritage as the most relevant tradition. Against this background of a critical theory of society, I discuss in the second section how cosmopolitanism can be understood as a critical approach and largely compatible with critical social theory. The third section develops this tie between critical theory and cosmopolitanism in terms of a more specific notion of critical cosmopolitanism. This can be seen as a contrast to the claims of liberal cosmopolitanism and some other schools of cosmopolitan thought.

Critique and critical theory

Since Horkheimer’s 1937 essay, ‘Traditional and Critical Theory’, and Marcuse’s 1941 Reason and Revolution, the Frankfurt School’s programme of critical theory has been the most systematic
attempt to re-establish the Hegelian–Marxist critical tradition by linking that tradition with insights drawn from Freud and social psychology. Critical theory as associated with the work of Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse was a form of critique that was primarily normative and can be termed normative critique in that it was constructed on the basis of a vision of an alternative – even if it could not be precisely named – to the prevailing social and political order. As in Horkheimer’s signal essay, it concerned social transformation and the elimination of social injustice. Their version of critical theory was normative in its concern with human emancipation and diagnostic in the recognition that existing social relations contain within them the means for their own overcoming. Critique is thus more than opposition to oppression or the pursuit of emancipation. In line with the Hegelian–Marxist dialectical method, the Frankfurt School theorists held that social reality was contradictory. The normative ideas of modern society were not realized or only partly actualized. These ideas, which can be termed regulative ideas of Reason, represent both future potential and at the same time a false consciousness in that they do not appear to members of society as normative ideas of society that take only an ideological form. Understood in these terms, normative critique was based on the central idea of immanent transcendence, namely the notion that society can transcend the given through a re-working and re-appropriation of its own self-understanding. Normative critique, understood in these terms, required a diagnostic approach to modern society in order to interpret the immanent signs of transcendence. Normative diagnostic critique, as a form of transcendence, proceeds immanently, as opposed to being an external perspective or an attitude that sees political transformation as deriving from outside the horizons of a given society.

Critical theory thus gave expression to a moral vision of the future possibilities of society as deriving from a process of social transformation driven forward by its internal dynamics. The Frankfurt School theorists stressed that this included the transformation of the individual’s psyche as well as institutional change. Critique was the key to this and a critical sociology was defined methodologically as one that sought to identify possibilities for critical thinking. The kind of critical sociology that the later Frankfurt School fostered was essentially one of ideology critique. Sociology’s main purpose was the critical diagnostic analysis of ideology in order to demonstrate false consciousness. In line with the methodology of immanent transcendence, truth had to be dialectically demonstrated as a way of understanding social phenomena that were capable of expressing contradictions and thus contained unresolved tensions and possibilities. Immanent transcendence signals a form of critique based on the internal transformation of society through processes of self-reflection, and is a contrast to both immanent critique and transcendental critique. This tradition of critique can be contrasted to other approaches, such as those of Foucault or Bourdieu. For Foucauldian critique is primarily an exercise in demonstrating how a subject is discursively constituted in power relations, while Bourdieu’s notion of critique is a reflexive methodology by which social science detaches itself from the social world in order to understand it. Neither are concerned with the identification of immanent possibilities for transformation within the present.

The Frankfurt School are now best remembered as social theorists and critics of mass culture, but their programme originally was an empirical sociology grounded in a political conception of society; their endeavour represented the theoretically most sophisticated alternative to what Horkheimer termed ‘traditional theory’, namely all forms of inquiry that take the given as the only form of reality. Honneth has argued that the conception of critique at work here is that of a ‘disclosing critique’. Critique proceeds by means of a disclosure of the social world whereby new interpretations are possible and which endeavour to alter our way of seeing the world:

A disclosing critique of society that attempts to change our value beliefs by evoking new ways of seeing cannot simply use a vocabulary of argumentative justification; rather, it can
achieve its effects only if it employs its resources that, by condensing or shifting meanings, show facts hitherto unperceived in social reality.

(Honneth 2000: 123; see also Bonacker 2006)

With Habermas, critical sociology had the precise goal of locating transcendence within the immanent structures of communication. From his early work on the public sphere to his theory of communicative action and the later discourse theory of democracy, Habermas has brought about a major reorientation of critique. In line with the Hegelian–Marxist tradition, the defining feature of critical sociology is the task of illustrating how the regulative ideas of Reason are articulated by social actors in situations of crisis and conflict where contrary political positions force deeper discursively achieved results. Normative critique thus becomes linked to a critical cognitive theory of developmental change in societal learning. Critique is thus forward-looking and concerned with shifts in self-understanding. Situations of major crisis – capitalist crisis or the wider conflict of system and life-world – give rise to social struggles. Habermas’ critical theory directs empirical analysis to those sites of contestation where cognitive changes for a better world are likely to be codified. In essence, critique as a methodology for social science is addressed to a critical problem and seeks to explain the specific form normative or regulative ideas take as a result of competing positions and the identification of pathologies. Critique proceeds from a critical issue or crisis to an account of the normative ideas that are involved to an analysis of how social actors position themselves with respect to the problem. In this way, macro issues are translated into the micro level of analysis.

Now, in the critical theory tradition the cosmopolitan implications were at best undeveloped and much of the focus was on western society and on issues that were not specifically cosmopolitan. Habermas’ political philosophy, while often invoking cosmopolitanism, is primarily a product of the republican tradition (Habermas 2003). Indeed, much of his work is based on what he has referred to as an ‘occidental understanding of the world’ (see Delanty 1997). Yet, despite these limits the theoretical framework of the critical theory tradition offers an important basis for a critical cosmopolitanism. In Habermas’ work the idea of the progressive expansion of communicative rationality is particularly pertinent to the cosmopolitan view of the world in terms of a communicatively grounded orientation towards understanding and agreement. The notion of the overcoming of differences through deliberation and the critical scrutiny of assumptions can be directly related to the widening of moral and political horizons in cosmopolitan thought. However, the significance of Habermas’ work for cosmopolitanism resides less in his political theory than in his communication theory and, more generally, his critical hermeneutics, that is an interpretative approach that would see the Gadamerian ‘fusion of horizons’ in the spirit of a critical engagement and self-problematization of what had been previously taken for granted. In the encounter with the Other, one’s horizons are broadened to take into account the perspective of the Other. This has been relatively neglected in his later work which has focused on a political philosophy addressed largely to Europe and to the emergence of an internal European cosmopolitanism.

The idea, developed by Honneth, of a disclosing critique in which new ways of seeing the world emerge out of the critical encounter of different viewpoints, is of major significance when it comes to the analysis of cosmopolitan phenomena. The notion of ‘world-disclosure’ – or a ‘disclosing critique’ to use Axel Honneth’s formulation – can be taken to be the core defining tenet of the epistemological framework of cosmopolitanism.3 This notion of critique very closely resonates with the cosmopolitan character of world-openness, which as discussed above is a defining feature of the cosmopolitan condition. It can be additionally noted that cosmopolitanism suggests a critical direction in social analysis in the assumption that social reality
is imbued with normative counter-factuals, such as notions of social justice, the universality of rights.4

The next section will explore more specifically this confluence of critique and cosmopolitanism.

**Cosmopolitanism as critique**

As I argued in my book, The Cosmopolitan Imagination, cosmopolitanism offers critical social theory a means to address new challenges (Delanty 2009). It offers a solution to the neglect of globalization and a more general concern with global issues that was a feature of the older critical theory tradition, which in many ways was confined to the analysis of modern European civilization. The idea of a critical cosmopolitanism is relevant to the renewal of critical social theory in its traditional concern with the critique of social reality and the search for immanent transcendence. It also offers a route out of the critique of domination and a general notion of emancipation that has so far constrained critical theory. It provides a promising approach to connect normative critique with empirically based analysis focused on exploring new ways of seeing the world. Such forms of world disclosure have become an unavoidable part of social reality today in terms of people’s experiences, identities, solidarities and values. These dimensions represent the foundations for a new conception of immanent transcendence. The notion of immanent transcendence constitutes, as argued by Piet Strydom (2011a), the core of the cosmopolitan imagination in so far as this is a way of viewing the social world in terms of its immanent possibilities for self-transformation and which can be realized only by taking the cosmopolitan perspective of Other as well as global principles of justice.

The general characteristics of cosmopolitanism include: centrality of openness and overcoming of divisions; the interaction; the logic of exchange, the encounter and dialogue; deliberative communication; self and societal transformation (transformational); and critical evaluation. Despite the western genealogy of the word cosmopolitanism, the term is used today in a ‘post-western’ register of meaning. In this sense it is ‘post-western’ orientation that is located neither on the national nor global level, but at the interface of the local and the global. These characteristics are empirical in the sense of being expressed in social reality as particular kinds of experience, but they are also forms of experience that entail their own interpretation as well as being the reference points for more reflexive forms of evaluation.

Taken together, these dimensions and characteristics of cosmopolitanism suggest a broad definition of cosmopolitanism as a condition of openness to the world and entailing self and societal transformation in light of the encounter with the Other. Central to such transformation is pluralization and the possibility of deliberation. It is evident, too, and it follows from the above that cosmopolitanism is not the same as internationalism, globalization, internationalism or transnationalism. Thus cosmopolitanism is better seen more in terms of a normative critique of globalization and as an alternative to internationalism. Transnationalism is more a non-necessary precondition of cosmopolitanism and one should resist the equation of cosmopolitanism with mobility per se.

The term critical cosmopolitanism signals the critical and transformative nature of cosmopolitanism. This is what distinguishes it from other uses of the term, which are often unclarified. The term was probably first used by Rabinow (1986) and has been invoked by Mignolo (2000) and also Rumford (2008). For Mignolo critical cosmopolitanism is a post-colonial critique of the Eurocentric presuppositions of cosmopolitan thought. In the sense I am using the term, it draws attention to the transformative potential within the present. Cosmopolitanism as a normative critique refers to phenomena that are generally in tension with their social context, which they seek to transform. This is what makes it particularly difficult to specify since it is a
discourse or phenomenon that is expressed in its effects on social contexts and in its response to social problems that are experienced by people in different contexts.

Cosmopolitanism is thus both a normative theory (which makes cognitive claims) and also a particular kind of social phenomenon. One of the problems with cosmopolitanism is that it is both an empirical and a normative concept, that is, as is increasingly recognized now in the expanding literature, it is both an experience or reality – in the sense of a lived experience and a measurable empirical condition – and an interpretation of the experience of the encounter. In so far as it is an interpretation, normative aspects enter into it. The difficulty, then, is that cosmopolitanism belongs to those phenomena that are both empirical and normative. In so far as it entails interpretative elements, it can in addition be characterized as having an evaluative dimension. In this latter sense cosmopolitanism can be held to be a critical attitude and, from the perspective of social science, a particular kind of analysis. This is an analysis that is essentially critical in that it is an approach to social reality that views social reality not only as an empirical phenomenon, but also as given form by counter-factuals. It is the nature of these counter-factuals that they involve normative ideas. Cosmopolitanism can thus be said to concern empirical phenomena or reality, interpretations (which are also empirical but normatively guided), and evaluations (which are of a higher order and require explanations, and which is where social science comes in).

One of the features of cosmopolitanism as a process of self-transformation is its communicative dimension. As a dialogic condition cosmopolitanism can be understood in terms of critical dialogue or deliberation. A deliberative conception of culture and politics captures the cosmopolitan spirit of engaging with the perspective of the Other as opposed to rejecting it. This is where the tie between cosmopolitanism and critical theory is strong. Habermas’ reorientation of critical theory towards communication and deliberative democracy still remains one of the more important resources for a theory of critical cosmopolitanism, though this has not received much attention. In this chapter I am emphasizing the critical logic of cosmopolitanism in opening up new horizons. This is a condition in which cultures undergo transformation in light of the encounter with the Other. It can take different forms. These range from the soft forms of multiculturalism to major re-orientations in self-understanding in light of global principles or re-evaluations of cultural heritage and identity as a result of inter-cultural encounters. What is noteworthy is the interactive dimension to the fusion of horizons, which is not a condition of external agency or a self-transcending subjectivity, but an orientation that develops out of the interplay of Self, Other and World relations.

This is essentially a dialogic relation. The cosmopolitan condition emerges out of the logic of the encounter, exchange and dialogue and the emergence of universalistic rules rather than by the assertion of a higher order of truths. It has been recognized in classical sociological theory in the interactionist tradition (G. H. Mead) and in genetic psychology (Piaget) that processes of universalization, such as generalization and abstraction, emerge from the inter-relation of different points of view and in turn to the formation of second-order reflexive or cognitive meta-rules (see Aboulafia 2006; Strydom 1999, 2011b). It is in this sense, then, of a relativatization of universalism that the epistemological framework of cosmopolitanism is a post-universalism since it stands for a universalism that does not demand universal assent or that everyone identify with a single interpretation. Depending on the social context or historical situation social actors will interpret universal rules differently and put them to different uses.

It is this feature of cosmopolitanism that distinguishes it from older conceptions of universalism in the sense of a universal order of values. Cosmopolitanism, properly understood, is rather characterized by a ‘post-universalistic’ conception of truth. By this is simply meant that statements of truth and justice, etc., are not absolute, immutable or derivable from an objective order of universal values, but nonetheless it is still possible to make judgements and evaluations.
Universalist claims in science are stronger than claims in the domain of culture and morality (see Chernilo in this volume). For cosmopolitanism, then, universalism is best understood as differentiated. This understanding of universalism has been variously recognized by philosophers as different as Hilary Putnam, Richard Rorty, Jürgen Habermas or Martha Nussbaum, and virtually all of the analytical tradition. In other words, cosmopolitanism entails a weak universalism that is compatible with relativism, understood as, in Sahlins’ formulation, ‘the provisional suspension of one’s own judgments in order to situate the practices at issue in the historical and cultural order that made them possible’ (Sahlins 2000: 21).

As discussed above, a methodological feature of critical theory is its concern with the objectivity of a problem: critique is driven by the fact that the social world produces problems which social actors and social science respond to in their different ways. Social science seeks to offer explanations which have the critical function of assisting social actors and the wider society in finding solutions and in understanding the nature of the problem. This concern with societal problems is also what animates the cosmopolitan imagination and gives to cosmopolitanism a critical edge. For cosmopolitan thought social problems are the primary challenge and are the context in which the broadening of moral and political horizons occurs. While the kind of problems that critical theory has been traditionally concerned with are those associated with the ‘critique of domination’, the cosmopolitan reconstitution of critical theory would rather focus on those societal problems that are global in scope.

Both the history of cosmopolitanism and critical theory share a concern with war and violence. The background to much of the critical theory tradition before Habermas was the centrality of the Holocaust as the culmination of modernity. Cosmopolitanism, too, has been a response to the experience of war and violence in the twentieth century. The emergence of cosmopolitanism after 1945 – as reflected in developments such as the idea of crimes against humanity, the UN Declaration of Human Rights, the general movements towards world-wide democratization, and the project of European integration – was in many ways shaped by the widely felt need to find global solutions based on dialogue rather than on violence.

The theoretical framework of critical cosmopolitanism

As argued above, cosmopolitanism refers to a specific kind of reality and is not merely a normative or interpretative approach that can be conducted without reference to social reality. The framework I am proposing for cosmopolitan analysis assumes a relational conception of the social, broadly defined. This is not the place to consider the competing relational approaches; for example actor network theory is one such contender (and one hostile to critical and normative theory), as is the sociological analysis of Charles Tilly, and various schools of network analysis, Elias’ figural sociology, and more broadly relational sociology (see Emirbayer 1997). For present purposes I would like simply to assert the primary ontological focus of cosmopolitan analysis as relational and to highlight in particular cosmopolitanism as comprised of different kinds of relationships. The kinds of relationships in question are those between Self and Other and World. Self and Other relationships are worked out in the context of engagements with the wider context of the World.

There are four main kinds of cosmopolitan relationships, and these can be said to constitute the ontological framework of cosmopolitan analysis.5 In this account, dispositional and systemic considerations are subordinated to a relational conception of cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitanism dispositions/attitudes or orientations and values should be seen in the context of particular kinds of relationships which are the focus of analysis rather than specific social actors. They are
embodied in cultural forms, such as frames, socio-cognitive structures, cultural repertoires, discourses, quasi-objective cultural phenomena. In these cultural forms universalistic meta-rules are present to varying degrees. All involve different levels of reflexivity.

The first is the relativization of one’s own identity. This is a type of relationship in which a reinterpretation of culture occurs as a result of the encounter of one culture with another. The use of the Other to reinterpret one’s own culture has been a feature of many forms of everyday cosmopolitanism, such as what is often called ‘cultural omnivorousness’ based on consumption, but also includes ‘soft’ kinds of cosmopolitanism around curiosity/appreciation of other cultures, and which are often found in educational programmes. In terms of dispositions, it is characterized by an orientation towards tolerance of diversity, recognition of interconnectedness and a general disposition of openness to others.

The second is the positive recognition of the Other. This is a type of relationship in which Self and Other encounters take a stronger form involving political and ethical commitments. In this instance a step in the direction of cosmopolitan citizenship occurs whereby universalistic meta-rules play a greater role. It is a stronger reflexive relationship entailing the inclusion of the other, not just awareness as in the previous type of relationship. Such types of relationship can be found in the so-called politics of recognition, as in liberal multiculturalism, the awareness of vulnerability, ethical and political consciousness and responsibility for others. One major expression of cosmopolitanism on this level is in the internationalization of law.

The third type of relationship concerns the mutual evaluation of cultures or identities, both one’s own and that of the Other. This is a self-reflexive mode of relationship that is based on cultural distance, scepticism, and critique and makes possible for people to mediate between cultures. It will typically be found in dialogic encounters and is sustained by deliberative style communication. Such kinds of relationships make possible the critique of cultures. Expressions of reflexivity can be found in varieties of postnationalism and what are often referred to as rooted or embedded forms of cosmopolitanism.

The fourth type of cosmopolitan relationship is a shared normative culture in which Self and Other relations are mediated through an orientation towards world consciousness. In this case global issues are predominant. This kind of cosmopolitanism entails the formation of a moral consciousness rooted in emotional responses to global issues, concern with global ethics based on shared values, putting the non-national interest before the national interest. One of the main expressions of such kinds of relationship is in new forms of civil society, such as global or cosmopolitan civil society. This, then, is a yet stronger expression of cosmopolitanism relating mostly to legal, institutional arrangements and major societal transformation whereby cosmopolitanism becomes constitutive of a new politics, global civil society, etc.

It should be noted that these four levels are not necessarily preconditions of each other, for they can be combined in different ways and one level may not presuppose another. It has also been noted in research on cosmopolitanism that people (or social units) are not cosmopolitan equally on all levels. However, as ‘ideal typifications’ of cosmopolitanism – the sense of Weber’s ‘empirical science of concrete reality’ – they represent generic forms of relationships and varying degrees of ‘thin’ and ‘thickness’ (Weber 1949).

The relational ontology of cosmopolitanism discussed in the foregoing can be linked with the critical theory tradition, in particular with the critical hermeneutic turn initiated by Habermas. As argued above, this resides in a view of the nature of interpretation as process of self-problematization and reflexivity in which critique is integral to, or immanent in, social relations and the self-understanding of social actors. I have stressed the processual nature of this in terms of degrees of reflexivity. In this view, then, cosmopolitanism is not a zero-sum condition, present or absent, but is always a matter of degree. Viewed in this light, the question then is not
whether or not cosmopolitanism exists, but to what degree is it present in a given social phenomenon.

**Conclusion**

The contemporary relevance of cosmopolitanism consists of its critical significance as both an analysis of social and political problems and as an account of the social world in terms of immanent possibilities for transcendence. Critical cosmopolitanism views the social world as possessing transformative possibilities that are located within the present but are future-oriented. In view of the overwhelming significance of globalization and global challenges for contemporary societies, critical cosmopolitanism can be seen as a normatively based critique of globalization. It is undoubtedly the case that the widespread appeal of cosmopolitanism in the human and social sciences is connected with the fact that globalization, in the sense of a globally connected world, does not in itself offer a normative account of a just world or a better life. Critical cosmopolitanism is addressed to the problems of a globalized world.

The position I have argued for in this chapter is that critical cosmopolitanism is not simply normative critique, but is grounded in the very constitution of social relations. It is in this sense that critical cosmopolitanism could be seen in somewhat stronger terms than a re-description of cosmopolitanism more generally or a term that highlights the critical component of cosmopolitanism. The key point here is that a critical cosmopolitan approach refers to immanent possibilities for transcendence such as those that might be related to concrete social struggles, global dialogue, inter-cultural encounters, etc.

For these reasons critical cosmopolitanism is perfectly compatible with notions of ‘rooted cosmopolitanism’ and generally with conceptions of cosmopolitanism that seek to relate cosmopolitanism to socially contextualized situations. However, where it differs from such approaches is in its concern with the identification of moments of self-transformation in contexts in which there is an expansion in reflexive capacities and ultimately in those situations in which something undergoes normative transformation from the encounter with the Other. This is why cosmopolitanism, as a mode of critique, is not simply manifest in the fact of hybridity or transnationalism.

**Notes**

1. For diverse perspectives, see Calhoun (1995) and Geuss (1981).
2. I am drawing in part in this section from Delanty (2011).
3. The terms ‘world-disclosure’ and a ‘disclosing critique’ have been variously used by Habermas and Honneth.
4. This has been reflected in much of recent cosmopolitan scholarship (Beck 2006; Benhabib 2008; Delanty 2009).
5. In an earlier publication (Delanty 2009) I referred to these as capacities, but I now think they need to be considered as relationships.

**References**


