Cosmopolitanism and Consumption

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Introduction

Attempts to define “cosmopolitanism” often tend to distinguish between the political and cultural connotations of the term. On the one hand, cosmopolitanism, as a form of global citizenship, has specific political and institutional implications related to global governance, world democracy and moral debates regarding human rights. On the other hand, many scholars argue that cosmopolitanism also refers to the cultural realm of citizenship and is therefore bound up in questions of identity, community and belonging in a globalized world. In other words, as Ulf Hannerz puts it, “cosmopolitanism has two faces … one is more cultural, the other more political” (2006: 9). Hannerz (2006: 5) captures the “two faces” of cosmopolitanism in his list of the various things “cosmopolitan” can stand for:

[S]omeone with many varied stamps in his or her passport; or a city or a neighborhood with a mixed population; or, with a capital C, a women’s magazine, at least at one time seen as a bit daring in its attitudes; or an individual of uncertain patriotic reliability, quite possibly a Jew; or someone who likes weird, exotic cuisines; or an advocate of world government; or, again with a capital C, a mixed drink combining vodka, cranberry juice, and other ingredients.

Contrasting the political dimensions of cosmopolitanism (“uncertain patriotic reliability” and advocacy of “world government”) against its cultural dimensions (travel, urban culture, exotic cuisine, and fashion and lifestyle magazines), this particular combination of examples highlights two important points. First, these examples suggest that cosmopolitanism is not just an abstract theoretical or political project, but that it is also “actually existing,” emerging in material, everyday practices and “habits of thought and feeling” (Robbins 1998: 2). Second, these references to travel, tourism, fashion, food and drink strongly associate cosmopolitanism with consumption. If cosmopolitanism is indeed a “form of consumption” (Binnie and
Skeggs 2004: 41), then understanding cosmopolitanism entails an examination of the habits of thought, feeling and practice related to consumption.

Intensified academic interest in cosmopolitanism as a cultural form and as a form of consumption is perhaps not surprising when understood in the broader context of social change over the past few decades. Since the 1980s, social life, especially in the west, has been largely shaped by globalization and by what many scholars have identified as a general shift from a producer to a consumer society (Lash and Urry 1994, Bauman 1998). As western societies have moved from production-centered capitalism, with its focus on work and the conditions of labor, to consumer capitalism, with its focus on leisure, taste and style, consumption has played an increasingly vital role in the patterning of social life, as a means of civic participation, and as a site of individual and collective identity construction (Bourdieu 1984). Similarly, many theories of globalization place culture and consumption front and center alongside politics and economy. In his influential article “Disjuncture and difference in the global cultural economy,” Appadurai (1990) characterizes globalization as a framework of overlapping “scapes” that encompasses economic, political and cultural global flows that characterize “international capital as deeply as they do international clothing styles” (297). Appearing in the same volume on “Global Culture,” Hannerz’s (1990) article “Cosmopolitans and locals in world culture” sets the tone for thinking of cosmopolitanism as a cultural orientation toward globalization. Indeed, Hannerz acknowledges that his line of thinking in that piece, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section, emerged out of his interest in the cultural aspects of globalization. Highly influential in their own right, these pieces by Appadurai and Hannerz reflect a wider consensus among scholars that globalization has brought increased attention to the role of culture and consumption in the organization of everyday life.

The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to consider how cosmopolitanism has become associated with the cultural dimensions of consumption. The chapter begins by outlining in further detail several cultural approaches to cosmopolitanism and consumption and then discusses three related debates—briefly summarized as homogeneity versus heterogeneity; inclusion versus exclusion; and “superficial” versus “authentic” cosmopolitanism—that shape this field of study. The chapter concludes that these debates pivot not on the separation of culture and politics, but rather on a convergence of the two. In this sense, consumption becomes a contested “cosmopolitical” terrain upon which the tendency for consumer-based capitalism to reproduce trenchant social inequalities is countered by the political potential for consumption to serve as a more ethical form of engagement between people.

Cosmopolitanism as Cultural Orientation

The connections between cosmopolitanism, culture and consumption are often traced back to Ulf Hannerz’s (1990) discussion of “cosmopolitans and locals” and John Urry’s (1995) concept of “aesthetic cosmopolitanism.” Both of these works
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identify cosmopolitanism as a cultural orientation that emerges in response to a culturally complex world. Hannerz defines cosmopolitanism as “a state of mind” and a cultural skill, conveying an “orientation, a willingness to engage with the Other … a state of readiness, a personal ability to make one’s way into other cultures, through listening, looking, intuiting and reflecting” (Hannerz 1990: 239). According to Hannerz, whether cosmopolitans travel the world or stay home and consume the exotic array of food, fashion and other cultural products that globalization makes available in their own neighborhoods, they are characterized primarily by their openness to other cultures. Not only do cosmopolitans demonstrate a kind of cultural competence “in maneuvering more or less expertly” within a variety of cultural systems, they actively “search for contrasts rather than uniformity” and express a “delight in difference” (Hannerz 1990: 239). Cosmopolitanism thus refers to an intellectual skill, an aesthetic savoir faire, and an affective pleasure in experiencing and navigating through cultural difference.

Urry elaborates on Hannerz’s description of the cosmopolitan in his model of “aesthetic cosmopolitanism,” which portrays the cosmopolitan as a highly mobile, curious and reflexive subject who delights in and desires to consume difference. Urry describes “aesthetic cosmopolitanism” as a cultural disposition that has developed alongside the growth of popular tourism and the penchant for “consuming” foreign places. Similar to Hannerz’s definition of cosmopolitanism, Urry describes a cultural disposition that involves “a stance of openness towards divergent experiences from different national cultures” and “a search for and delight in contrasts between societies rather than a longing for uniformity or superiority” (Urry 1995: 167). According to Urry, the key features of “aesthetic cosmopolitanism” include extensive mobility; curiosity about and appreciation of other places and cultures; a willingness to risk moving beyond the “tourist bubble”; a reflexive ability to locate one’s own society and culture in a broader historical and geographical context; and a “semiotic skill” (Urry 1995: 167). In these accounts, cosmopolitanism does not refer to global citizenship merely as a political or institutional status in terms of global governance, but as a cultural disposition embodying sentiments, affiliations and interpretive skills that transcend local and national boundaries.

Urry’s “aesthetic cosmopolitanism” is distinctive in that it is “firmly anchored in the practices of popular consumer culture” (Tomlinson 1999: 201, emphasis in original). The skills and attitudes expressed in “aesthetic cosmopolitanism” are cultural symptoms of the emergence of a novel form of “consumer citizenship” that defines the modern experience: “A modern person is one who is able to exercise those rights and who conceives of him or herself as a consumer of other cultures and places” (Urry 1995: 165). Indeed, cosmopolitanism, as expressed through travel and consumption, has become an ordinary feature of daily modern life in western societies, a point Urry makes by referring to Hebdige’s concept of “mundane cosmopolitanism.” Hebdige explains that people are world travelers, either directly or via their televisions: “It is part of being ‘taken for a ride’ in and through late-twentieth century consumer culture. In the 1990s everybody [at least in the ‘west’] is more or less cosmopolitan” (Hebdige, in Urry 1995: 167). This kind
of everyday cosmopolitanism constitutes a more recent line of theorization that also firmly links cosmopolitanism to culture and consumption.

Everyday articulations of cosmopolitanism are perhaps best characterized in Beck’s (2003, 2004, 2006) concept of “banal cosmopolitanism.” Drawing on Billig’s (1995) formulation of “banal nationalism,” which describes how political consciousness is molded through daily routines, Beck argues that participating in unremarkable daily routines, like shopping, eating or listening to music, produces new cosmopolitan identities. Reflecting on the example of food, Beck (2003: 37) explains:

If we are what we eat, none of us is national anymore … We are now all used to finding foodstuffs that used to be separated by continents and cultures freely available side-by-side as mass market commodities. This selection … is the basic ingredient of a culinary cosmopolitanism. … World society is in some ways baking in the oven and broiling in the pan.

Beck’s culinary illustration of “banal cosmopolitanism” reveals it to be intimately tied to practices of consumption. Indeed, he identifies “banal cosmopolitanism” explicitly as a form of cultural consumption, not only of food, but also of music, fashion and lifestyles, that makes us all “more cosmopolitan than we think” (Beck 2003: 38). In this sense, consumption engenders a particular cosmopolitan consciousness in relation to cultural difference.

In her studies of metropolitan London in the early 1900s, Nava (2002, 2007) explores in detail the everyday expressions of an emerging cosmopolitan consciousness in early twentieth-century consumer culture. Concerned with vernacular practices of “the global modern everyday,” Nava (2002: 89) pays attention to the articulation of a cosmopolitan imagination in the mundane practices of shopping. In her analysis of the opening of Selfridge’s department store in London in 1909, Nava illustrates the way designs, fashions and cultural products from abroad helped to cultivate among middle-class women a “cosmopolitan structure of feeling.” This feeling captured “the fluidity and excitement of modern urban life, physical mobility and encounters with strangers … and, above all, the advent of a new modern consciousness: a psychic, social and visceral readiness to engage with the new, with difference” (Nava 2002: 82). While this consciousness was novel at the beginning of the last century, by now, Nava concludes, difference has become a familiar and unremarkable feature of vernacular cosmopolitanism in urban culture today.

Along with Hannerz and Urry, Nava understands cosmopolitanism as a cultural orientation toward difference, however her analysis specifically highlights the affective and desirous elements of this orientation. In this sense, her analysis helps to illustrate the way cosmopolitanism is embedded in everyday “habits of thought and feeling” (Robbins 1998: 2). These conceptualizations of cosmopolitanism as a structure of feelings and fantasies, as a set of cultural skills and competences, and as part of the “banal” makeup of every day life, signify an important shift from thinking about the cosmopolitan as an abstract political figure to thinking
about the cosmopolitan as a lifestyle consumer. In other words, global citizenship revolves not just around political engagement or civic participation, but also around cosmopolitan tastes, styles and patterns of consumption.

Nava’s work also emphasizes the way the cosmopolitan imagination and related forms of cosmopolitan consumption were, and continue to be, shaped by gender, race and class. In this sense, her analysis provides an important corrective to the models of cosmopolitanism outlined by Hannerz and Urry, both of which have been critiqued by feminist and postcolonial scholars for failing to acknowledge the particularly Euro-American, white, male and privileged perspective the cosmopolitan figure assumes. Like Nava, many of these critics have sought to account for the way gender, race, class, ethnicity and sexuality shape cosmopolitan patterns of consumption and position cosmopolitan subjects unequally in what Massey (1993) has called the power-geometry of time–space compression. For example, in a critical reading of Hannerz’s distinction between cosmopolitans and locals, Jones and Leshkowich (2003) question Hannerz’s categorization of Nigerian women as “local.” They take issue with his explanation that the women’s cross-border smuggling of frozen fish sticks, dehydrated milk and baby clothes did not “go beyond the horizons of urban Nigerian culture” and therefore did not count as cosmopolitan (Hannerz 1990: 238). To Jones and Leshkowich, in contrast, these goods strongly hint at cosmopolitan aspirations and the desire to acquire “the material goods literally to fashion themselves (and, in this case, their children) as cosmopolitans conversant with global heterogeneity” (Jones and Leshkowich 2003: 16). This implicit gendering of the “local” as feminine and the “cosmopolitan” as masculine reflects “a widespread ‘masculinist’ tendency in studies of globalization” that tends to erase “how gender and other factors unequally shape access to processes of cultural production and material accumulation” (Jones and Leshkowich 2003: 16, and see Nava 2002: 88, Freeman 2001). This and similar analyses draw attention to the complex articulation of difference in the realm of cosmopolitan consumption, especially as cosmopolitan desires are negotiated alongside the commodification of difference. They reveal the way commodity objects, everyday consumer activities such as eating, shopping, dressing and traveling, and imaginative and mediated terrains of consumption are infused with power and politics. The sections that follow provide an overview of these tensions and the paradoxes that frame critical debates around cosmopolitanism and consumption.

Commodifying Difference: Homogeneity versus Heterogeneity

Appadurai asserts that the central problem of globalization is the “tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization” (1990: 295). He points out that increased global flows of media, technology, people and capital have led to a sense of standardization in some realms, such as the appearance of McDonald’s golden arches around the world; at the same time, he notes, cultural forms rarely travel intact and tend to be appropriated or altered in different cultural contexts.
For many theorists, however, what is at stake in cultural globalization is not a simple distinction between homogeneity and heterogeneity. Some suggest that cultural forms and practices are more likely to be implicated in “global structures of common difference” than to fall neatly into binary categories of global hegemony or local appropriation (Wilk 1995: 117), while others argue that cultural globalization results in a more contingent, indeterminate and hybrid form of culture (Bhabha 1994, Pieterse 1995, 2004).

In either case, the tensions between homogenization and heterogenization have shaped much of the scholarship in the field of cultural globalization over the past two decades and continue to pose a particularly significant paradox in the relationship between cosmopolitanism and consumption. On the one hand, the forms of aesthetic or banal cosmopolitanism described earlier entail a desire to consume cultural difference. On the other hand, the very act of consuming difference results in, at best, a hollowing-out or watering-down of that difference, and at worst, a form of appropriation and symbolic oppression of the Other. This paradox is reflected in hooks’ chilling observation that “the commodification of difference promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, via exchange, by a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other’s history through a process of decontextualization” (hooks 1992: 431). If consumption eradicates difference, then cosmopolitan consumption seems to be an impossible proposition.

One way this paradox manifests itself is in spaces of cosmopolitan consumption, such as shopping malls, global cities and tourist destinations, where the homogenizing effects of globalized architectural styles and transnational industry standards are held in tension with the diversity of local products and cultures on offer in those places (Ritzer 2005, Urry 1995, Sheller and Urry 2004, Zukin 1996). Aware that they are competing on a global stage for capital investment and tourists, cities brand themselves as cosmopolitan by offering world-class accommodations, transportation and entertainment, while at the same time accentuating unique environmental or cultural features that make visiting that particular place worthwhile. According to Harvey (1990: 271), what becomes important in this global milieu is “the building and signaling of [each place’s] unique qualities in an increasingly homogeneous but fragmented world.” According to some theorists, cosmopolitanization also constitutes a new form of urban renewal through which cities capitalize on cultural diversity to transform themselves into globalized spaces of consumption (Binnie and Skeggs 2004, Binnie et al. 2006, Bodaar 2006).

In this and other ways, cosmopolitanism has proved useful to capitalism’s imperative to move into new markets. As Marx and Engels (1952 [1848]: 46–7) explain, capitalism is, in its very nature, cosmopolitan:

The need for a constantly changing market chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must settle everywhere, establish connexions everywhere ... the bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. [Emphasis added]
According to Binnie and Skeggs (2004), the notion that cosmopolitanism is itself part of the cultural logic of global capitalism has significant implications not only for the production and consumption of cultural difference, but also for the ethical purchase of cosmopolitanism as a mode of cross-cultural understanding. To make this point, Binnie and Skeggs contrast the position taken by Beck (2000) and Cheah (1998) with a more cynical perspective expressed by Žižek (1997) and Brennan (1997). Whereas Beck and Cheah see cosmopolitanism as creating new forms of engagement with others, both Žižek and Brennan argue that cosmopolitanism is merely a guise under which the logic of late capitalism exploits and markets difference. For example, Binnie and Skeggs (2004) argue that branding gay urban spaces as “cosmopolitan” is less about creating a space for genuine encounters across lines of sexuality or class and more about marketing sexuality as cultural difference. Instead of creating authentic connections between strangers, cosmopolitan differences are valued, quite literally, for their marketability. Engagement with others becomes a question of knowing their value: “Is their culture worth knowing, experimenting with?” (Skeggs 2004: 159).

Within the consumer logic of late capitalism, then, cultural difference underpins a cosmopolitan style, but not necessarily a cosmopolitan ethic. Beck (2006: 150–1) argues that this logic extends to cosmopolitanism itself: “Cosmopolitanism has itself become a commodity: the glitter of cultural difference fetches a good price. Images of an in-between world, of the black body, exotic beauty, exotic music, exotic food and so on, are globally cannibalized, re-staged and consumed as products for mass markets.” The result is a “safe form of multiculturalism” (Binnie et al. 2006: 250) that allows the privileged cosmopolitan consumer to get close to the Other, but not too close or too involved (see Ahmed 2000). According to Kalra et al. (2005), even the transgressive potential of hybridity falls prey to the commodifying logic of capitalism, relegated to a kind of “benign multiculturalism” that allows the cosmopolitan to consume cultural products from the diaspora—such as music, film and literature—and yet remain ignorant of the “places that are being bombed and crippled by the actions of imperialism resurfaced” (48).

What is significant here is the way the capitalist process of commodification is seen to deplete or contain cultural difference, resulting instead in what Jones and Leshkowich (2003) describe as “homogenized heterogeneity.” Homogenized heterogeneity refers to the way cultural differences are identified and appreciated, but then appropriated in ways that diminish those differences or marginalize them in relation to global modernity. When this happens, “difference is transformed. Its edges are smoothed and its contours are flattened so that it fits more neatly into its assigned pigeonhole in the global display of culture” (Jones and Leshkowich 2003: 14, and see Wilk 1995). In this sense, commodification reduces the concepts of hybridity, diversity and cultural difference to the “occasional experience of exotic commodities which can be repackaged to sustain the insatiable trade in new forms of cultural identity” (Papastergiadis 2000, cited in Kalra et al. 2005: 101).

Cosmopolitanism often entails fantasies of transcending cultural differences, but as the analyses described above suggest, consumerist ideology tends to reproduce the very social divisions cosmopolitanism claims to dissolve. Given the tendency for
commodification to incorporate and exploit cultural differences, can cosmopolitan aspirations toward universality ever be realized through practices of consumption? In her study of the Hmong diaspora, Schein (1998) describes the transnational commodity relations through which comparatively well-off Hmong residing in the United States obtain traditional costumes and cultural goods produced by their Miao “brethren” in China, with whom they purportedly share cultural ties. Schein argues that these commodity relations reveal a key contradiction: “In one sense, their messages are of horizontal fraternity … But in another sense, they have been constructed on a bedrock of inexorable disparity” (Schein 1998: 167). This contradiction between “horizontal fraternity” and “inexorable disparity” points toward another paradox in cosmopolitan consumption that pits ideals of cosmopolitan inclusiveness against uses of cosmopolitanism as a marker of distinction.

**Cosmopolitanism as Distinction: Inclusion versus Exclusion**

By consuming a cosmopolitan array of media images, travel experiences, food and fashion, consumers around the world are promised membership in the global community via the marketplace. At the same time, cosmopolitan consumption requires a level of knowledge, competence and sophistication that distinguishes the discerning consumer from the parochial hoi polloi. In this sense, cosmopolitan consumption connotes universality at the same time that its logic of distinction reproduces material and symbolic inequalities based on hierarchies of race, class, gender, ethnicity and sexuality. This paradox shapes a second set of debates over the inclusive potential versus the exclusive effects of cosmopolitan consumption.

According to many scholars, the global flows of media images help foster a cosmopolitan consciousness by enabling viewers to imagine the lives of other people living in other places around the world and to locate their own lives in this global context (Appadurai 1990, Urry 2000, Szerszynski and Urry 2002, 2006, Schein 1999, Beck 2006). These “mediascapes,” which are consumed primarily in people’s living rooms, are seen as a form of “banal cosmopolitanism” (Beck 2006) and as a vital underpinning to the cosmopolitan disposition toward cultural difference described by Hannerz (1990) and Urry (1995). The extent to which these images bring viewers to a more sophisticated understanding of the world beyond their doorstep or merely reproduce culturally-based hierarchies and generally-held assumptions about the world is certainly a point of debate (see Lutz and Collins 1993, Parks 2003). Nevertheless, several studies suggest that this mundane consumption of global media has an inclusive effect, helping people to feel part of a wider global community.

In their UK-based media study, Szerszynski and Urry (2002, 2006) argue that exposure to increasingly large volumes of visual flows depicting foreign cultures and global imagery helps to generate a cosmopolitan disposition amongst viewers. According to their findings, global imagery transmitted through television and
advertising constitutes “a ‘publicly screened’ cosmopolitan culture” that brings the world into people’s homes and extends their awareness of the world beyond the domestic realm (Szerszynski and Urry 2002: 461). Experiencing “the simultaneity of events and the knowledge of this simultaneity all over the world,” according to Beck (2006: 42), results in an “inner cosmopolitanization” or a “globalization of emotions and empathy.” In other words, the global media not only enables people to imagine the world beyond their own locality, but to feel a kind of cosmopolitan connection to the world community.

Whereas Szerszynski and Urry develop their argument from the perspective of British viewers, Schein’s (1999) research on media consumption in post-socialist China reveals a particularly Chinese form of cosmopolitanism. Schein observes that even though Chinese consumers in post-Mao China could not afford to travel or purchase foreign goods, they fulfilled their desire to “acquire worldliness” by consuming a panorama of transnational programming depicting “the world’s goods and lifestyles” (1999: 360). For Schein, this global commodity desire, effected through the consumption of satellite broadcasts and media imagery rather than the purchase of actual commodities, constituted a kind of “imagined cosmopolitanism” that provided at least the illusion of spatial, class, gender and race mobility, and an escape from the constraints of economic, geohistorical and political exclusions. Central to this desire to participate, even in symbolic ways, in global consumer culture, Schein argues, was a longing for inclusion, “horizontal comradeship,” and the eradication of “the differentials of power and wealth that otherwise amount to exclusions” (1999: 360). At the other end of the class spectrum, Ong (1999) describes how affluent Hong Kong residents used consumption as a means to detach themselves from local economic, political and social constraints in advance of the island’s return to Chinese rule. Opting instead for a free-floating, “flexible citizenship,” these wealthy Chinese consumers purchased real estate, made business investments, or enrolled their children in private schools abroad as a means of establishing residency in multiple places. In this case, their purchasing power enabled them to perform a material kind of cosmopolitan citizenship that their poorer counterparts could only imagine.

Schein’s and Ong’s findings align with Ferguson’s assertion that consumption of “cosmopolitan” goods and lifestyles constitutes a claim to membership in global society. In his review of anthropological research in postcolonial Africa, Ferguson notes that many researchers interpreted Africans’ acquisition of the material goods and social manners of their European colonizers either as a form of mimicry, or as a process of indigenization. In contrast, Ferguson sees postcolonial Africans’ consumption of European fashions, goods, cosmetics and lifestyles as an expression of their desire “to be full and equal citizens of a modern urban society” (Ferguson 2002: 555). By adopting European dress and manners, Ferguson argues, African consumers were not imitating their white colonizers or appropriating these goods into indigenous meaning structures. Instead, they were asserting their “political and social rights to full membership in a wider society” (555). Here, cosmopolitanism is held to its ideals of universality and inclusion, and consumption of international
or “western” goods, images and lifestyles constitutes a claim to membership in the modern world society.

This longing for equal membership in the global community is evident, as well, in the consumption practices of other non-western groups. For example, in his description of a second-hand marketplace in Tonga, Besnier (2004) describes how Tongans use consumption practices to articulate a modern and cosmopolitan self. In the act of buying and selling objects sent by their diasporic relatives, Tongans demonstrate membership in global modernity through their access to western commodities, knowledge of western culture, fluency in English, and above all, participation in the cornerstone of modernity: consumer culture. Fadzillah (2005) tells a similar story about rural teenage girls in northern Thailand who sell beauty products for multinational corporations like Amway and Avon. She notes that by involving themselves with the commodity world of the global beauty industry, these girls move literally and symbolically beyond their rural backgrounds and align themselves instead with the “cosmopolitan” world of travel, money and international beauty. In India, the influx of international brands has made global lifestyles available to urban middle-class women who negotiate ideals of Indian femininity within a context of global media and flows and international measure of beauty. According to Munshi (2001), these “Globo–Indians” consume cosmetics and beauty products in order to perform a “modern” global version of womanhood.

These studies identify the intense and ambivalent desires embedded in practices of cosmopolitan consumption at the “subaltern” end of the power-geometry of globalization, where fantasies of cosmopolitan inclusion rub up against social, economic and political exclusions based on gender, race and class. Schein’s and Ong’s analyses show how access to the material artifacts of cosmopolitanism is regulated by class, while Fadzillah’s and Munshi’s accounts make it clear that cosmopolitanism at this end of the power spectrum is highly feminized. As Schein acknowledges, such desires to transcend spatial or social differences do not “presume any actual diminishment of difference among media consumers around the world, but rather its disavowal as an effect of the consumption of global media” (1999: 360–1). According to these analyses, consumption—of media images as well as of material goods—enables postcolonial “subaltern” classes to participate in global modernity and to legitimize their membership in the global community. At the same time, however, these strategies of propelling oneself into a putatively inclusive cosmopolitan world community often rely on practices of distinction and exclusion based on familiar hierarchies of race, class and gender. Besnier acknowledges that in Tonga, cosmopolitanism is “an important prestige-manipulation tool” that allows high-ranking and wealthy Tongans to “assert their superiority over commoners, the poor, and the poorly connected” (2004: 11). Cosmopolitan consumption is as much a marker of exclusion, then, as it is a means of transcending hierarchies of difference.

Despite the aspirations toward cosmopolitan inclusion described above, a more familiar critical reading of cosmopolitanism depicts it as an exclusive class position reserved for a mobile, bourgeois elite with expensive tastes and jet-set lifestyles (Featherstone 2002, Vertovec and Cohen 2002, Calhoun 2002). These “cosmocrats”
are known primarily by their global connoisseurship, their affinity for international travel and consuming foreign places, and an “acquired taste for artifacts from around the world” (Vertovec and Cohen 2002: 7). In this sense, tastes, preferences and cultural competencies involved in cosmopolitan consumption operate as markers of distinction rather than inclusion (Bourdieu 1984). This is especially evident in cosmopolitan orientations toward food and fashion.

In one sense, the global mobility of culinary styles and the increased availability of ingredients from around the world signals a kind of democratic “cosmopolitan omnivorousness” (Woodward et al. 2008: 214). In another sense, however, the knowledgeable consumption of exotic foods constitutes a strategy of exclusion that distinguishes the cosmopolitan elite from the parochial masses. In his study of “ethnic” restaurants in Sydney, Hage (1997) demonstrates how eating ethnic foods serves as a classificatory practice. In one Sydney suburb with a thriving ethnic restaurant culture, Hage finds that residents distinguish themselves as daring, sophisticated and worldly in contrast to the unsophisticated population of another area of Sydney lacking in “authentic” ethnic restaurants. Hage also observes that the white diners in this Sydney suburb consume not just foreign foods, but the cultural diversity that food represents. As Hage puts it, these “cosmo-multicultural” consumers do not just eat the spicy curry, but “eat” the difference between the curry and the pesto (Hage 1997: 129).

Consuming difference in this way, Hage (1997: 129) suggests, requires a “certain distance from the materiality of the food” that allows for consumption, not of the food itself, but of the difference between foods. These instances of “tasting” cultural difference are less about embodied encounters with the immigrants who prepare and serve the food than they are about marketing diversity as a tourist attraction (Hage, 1997: 121, see also hooks 1992, Heldke 2003, Germann Molz 2007). In this case, knowing how to navigate and consume the global flows of food and cuisines becomes a marker of distinction that reinscribes difference in three ways: first through the consumption of cultural diversity signified by the various cuisines; second through the separation between self and Other required to “sample” this cultural diversity; and then again as wealthy suburbanites distinguish themselves from their working-class counterparts in another neighborhood.

The global flows of fashion are another arena where some people’s claims to cosmopolitan knowledge and competence are upheld while other claims are marginalized or excluded. As Jones and Leshkowich (2003: 9) point out, “style [is] an important terrain for negotiations over power.” This is evident in Nava’s (1996, 2002) study of early twentieth-century shopping culture in London, which reveals that women’s forays into cosmopolitanism via fashion and shopping were, at the same time, undermined by anxious discourses that characterized female desires for consumer goods as insatiable, irrational and even pathological. Female consumption, in other words, was seen as an inferior form of participation in an emerging global modernity. If the consumption practices of these white, middle-class, urban women were deemed insufficient markers of membership in global society, then where does that leave the claims to cosmopolitanism asserted by the Chinese, Tongan, Thai, Indian or African consumers described earlier? How is their
participation in global consumer culture kept in its place, so to speak? Jones and Leshkowich’s analysis of the recent emergence of Asian styles on the global fashion scene is instructive in this sense. Jones and Leshkowich (2003: 5) acknowledge that, in one sense, “the global interest in Asian dress might seem to open new democratic forms of cross-cultural exchange,” however, “no matter what form these fashions may take and no matter how praised they may be by fashion elites located in the centers of power, they get defined as somehow lesser than, somehow Other to, and somehow more feminized than their perennial Western foil.” In this way, “Other” claims to cosmopolitan legitimacy serve as the constitutive limit for western, elite assertions of cosmopolitan authority. As these studies reveal, cosmopolitan consumption tends to reproduce social divisions rather than providing equal membership in a global community. This engenders a deep skepticism about the limited potential of consumption as a strategy for practicing global citizenship.

**Consumer-Citizenship:**

“Superficial” versus “Authentic” Cosmopolitanism

A third key debate revolves around the links between cosmopolitan consumption and political claims of global citizenship. Within this debate, we can discern two distinct but related modes of cosmopolitanism: a “superficial” cosmopolitanism that entails dabbling in cultural difference; and a more “authentic” cosmopolitanism that translates into deeper forms of cross-cultural engagement (Kendall et al. 2009). On the one hand, critics identify certain forms of cosmopolitan consumption as little more than an aesthetic appreciation or recognition of cultural difference that remains on the surface, so to speak (Beck 2006, Chaney 2002, Regev 2007). In this case, cosmopolitanism entails a primarily stylistic engagement with cultural difference, concerned more with what looks, tastes or feels interesting than with the political or economic conditions of production and consumption. In contrast to this kind of “depthless” cosmopolitanism, some scholars have argued that cosmopolitan consumption may also involve an ethico-political orientation concerned with humanity, the “oneness of the world,” and the possibility of a more just world order (Szerszynski and Urry 2002). Consumers see their actions in the marketplace as deeply intertwined with democratic ideals, with the material and political welfare of others across the world, and with the well-being of the global environment. This “authentic” form of cosmopolitanism, which sees consumption as a potentially civic act, emphasizes the political as opposed to aesthetic dimension of global citizenship.

According to Urry (1999), globalization has extended the rights, responsibilities and risks that constitute citizenship beyond the confines of the nation-state, implicating individuals in universal and de-territorialized modes of membership. He notes that the rights, responsibilities and risks that constitute this liberal model of global citizenship involve both aesthetic elements (such as the rights to
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travel internationally, to consume other places, and to access global media; or the responsibility to respond to images that address people as differentiated citizens of the globe, but also ethical and political elements (such as a responsibility to be informed about the state of the globe or to act on behalf of the globe as a whole rather than in terms of shared identity interests; or the right to form social movements with citizens of other states to protest state or corporate powers). The tension between the aesthetic and ethico-political dimensions of global citizenship inflects the debate between “superficial” and “authentic” cosmopolitan consumption as well. The question is: can cosmopolitan consumption be both? Scholars wonder whether “exposure to other cultures—from buying bits of them to learning to partake in their beliefs and practices—[will] lead to a fundamental change in attitudes?” (Vertovec and Cohen 2002: 9). Put simply, are “global shoppers” likely to “endorse human rights issues or feel generous toward migrants and refugees?” (Woodward et al. 2008: 13)

Critics doubt that consumption practices and commodified forms of cosmopolitanism can lead to “genuine” forms of cosmopolitan engagement, often citing the inherent paradoxes surrounding commodification, difference, inclusion and exclusion discussed earlier (Vertovec and Cohen 2002, Calhoun 2002, Binnie and Skeggs 2004, Jubas 2007). For these critics, cosmopolitan commodities and lifestyles skim the surface of cultural difference, providing few channels for political agency or incentives for fostering genuine cross-cultural encounters. Heldke (2003: 22) argues that the cosmopolitan pleasure in consuming difference and novelty through cultural commodities like “ethnic” food, for instance, relies on, and indeed preserves, the consumer’s ignorance about that other culture. Cosmopolitan consumption serves up, as Hage (1997: 118) puts it, “multiculturalism without the migrants” and “foreign-ness without the foreigners.” Sociopolitical issues like human rights, migration, ethnic cleansing or global wealth inequalities are apparently not on the menu for the cosmopolitan consumer.

Calhoun agrees that consumption practices have limited purchase in the realm of global citizenship. The global mobility of Chinese food or McDonald’s, he says, “tells us little about whether to expect democracy on a global scale, successful accommodation of immigrants at home or respect for human rights across the board” (Calhoun 2002: 105). Calhoun refers to cultural consumables, such as tourism, food, music and fashion, as the “easy faces of cosmopolitanism.” Consuming these commodities may be culturally broadening, he argues, “but they are not hard tests for the relationship between local solidarity and international civil society” (Calhoun 2002: 105). Furthermore, the deeper cosmopolitanism burrows into capitalism, the more likely it is to reproduce rather than transcend deep and systemic inequalities. Calhoun sees little, if any, transgressive potential in what he calls “consumerist cosmopolitanism”: “If there is to be a major redistribution of wealth, or a challenge to the way the means of production are controlled in global capitalism, it is not likely to be guided by cosmopolitanism as such” (Calhoun 2002: 106).

This attenuation of the political potential of consumption may stem from the fact that consumers often purchase clothing or electronic goods with no sense of where
they were manufactured. They are unwittingly implicated in global trade circuits that link them to the wider world (Beck 2004, 2006, Timmerman 2008). Indeed, because the capitalist logic through which cultural difference is commodified relies on a material and emotional distancing, consumers are able to ignore or disavow unpalatable differences when they make their purchases. In this case, Beck explains, cosmopolitanism can emerge as the “latent” or “unconscious” side effect of world trade or transnational interdependencies. The question Beck poses is whether such “latent” forms of cosmopolitanism can underpin any kind of substantive political agency, or whether they are doomed to be “trivial,” negligible or even dubious (Beck 2004: 134).

Appadurai’s discussion of “fetishism” is useful in synthesizing these perspectives. Drawing on Marx’s notion of commodity fetishism, Appadurai (1990) introduces two new forms of fetishism that underpin cultural globalization: “production fetishism” and “fetishism of the consumer.” Production fetishism refers to efforts to brand as “local” commodities and services that are actually produced through globally distributed circuits of management, material resources and labor. For example, production fetishism makes it possible to market Volkswagens as “national” products, even though they are assembled from parts sourced from all over the world (Beck 2006: 40–1). In this case, Appadurai (1990: 307) argues, the locality “becomes a fetish which disguises the globally dispersed forces that actually drive the production process.” The counterpart to this is the “fetishism of the consumer,” by which the consumer is transformed into a sign that stands in for real agency. Here, Appadurai argues, mediated images and ideas of consumer agency replace actual agency, and they do so in such subtle ways that “the consumer is consistently helped to believe that he or she is an actor, where in fact he or she is at best a chooser” (1990: 307). In this formulation, there seems to be little hope for achieving global political agency through consumption.

Other scholars are far more optimistic about the potential relationship between culture, consumption and citizenship. For one thing, argues Beck (2006: 41–2), even “banal” cosmopolitanism equips individuals with the skills necessary for navigating in an increasingly global world:

What seems … to be ‘eclecticism’ or ‘inauthenticity’ … can be understood in terms of a new reflexivity. Here elements from many different countries and cultures are continually compared, rejected, combined and remixed. Thought through to its conclusion, there arises a whole network of everyday practices and skills to deal with a high degree of interdependence and globality.

For another, a cosmopolitan consciousness or “structure of feeling,” even one cultivated through consumption, is seen as the foundation for an emerging cosmopolitan civil society (Stevenson 1997, Meijer 1998, Urry 2000, Kendall et al. 2009). According to Urry, participating in cosmopolitan consumer culture through international travel or exposure to global media images is far more connected to citizenship and citizen rights than skeptics acknowledge. He argues that the rights to travel and to consume other cultures and places are, themselves, markers of
citizenship. What is emerging, Urry (2000) suggests, is a “consumer citizenship” that challenges previous distinctions between private and public spheres and makes possible new forms of civic participation and political resistance.

Stevenson (2002) similarly argues that consumption is precisely a political site where cosmopolitan citizenship might be enacted. For Stevenson, because shopping requires consumers to make daily ethical choices about the products they buy and the way they inhabit private and public space, consumption constitutes an ethical, moral and political domain that is central to citizenship, despite a “masculine logic that sees it as a peripheral activity” (Stevenson 2002: 310). Fully invigorating “consumer-citizenship” as a substantive civic subjectivity relies, Stevenson argues, not just on the development of formal cosmopolitan institutions, but also on a cosmopolitan sensibility structured around respect for ecological and cultural diversity, concern for social inequities, moral acceptance of human rights (2002: 314). In this sense, consumer society has the potential to become an arena for political action and cosmopolitan solidarity.

An example of these new forms of consumption-based political participation are the various campaigns and forms of “ethical,” “sustainable” or “compassionate” consumption that seek to promote global causes via the marketplace. Boycotts of fashion brands that employ sweatshop labor abroad, advocacy of “fair trade” or “green” commodities, and issues-based marketing campaigns like Product (RED) and Make Poverty History, have all framed global civic participation in the context of consumption (Sáiz 2005, Seyfang 2005, Jubas 2007, Nash 2008). These emerging consumption trends blur the distinction between “authentic” and “superficial” forms of cosmopolitan consumption, posing the real possibility that consumption can bring about sociopolitical change but also raising serious critiques about the way these campaigns mobilize well-worn stereotypes that perpetuate social hierarchies and related material inequalities. Are these consumer campaigns examples of global political action, or do they further illustrate Appadurai’s notion of “consumer fetishism”?

This debate has coalesced to a significant degree around the Product (RED) brand campaign (see Himmelmani and Mupotsa 2008). Launched in 2006 by U2’s lead singer, Bono, and the company’s CEO, Bobby Shriver, Product (RED) partners with iconic global brands to sell (RED) branded consumer goods in order to raise awareness and money in the fight against AIDS in Africa. Sarna-Wojcicki (2008: 14) identifies Product (RED) as a form of “causumerism,” which she defines as “a particular mode of political activism through consumer choice” that empowers shoppers to “make a statement with their purchases.” By channeling consumers’ cosmopolitan consciousness via purchasing power, Product (RED) has raised more than $100 million and garnered extensive publicity for the Global Fund, an organization that fights AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria worldwide. On the one hand, commentators applaud this material success and acknowledge Product (RED)’s ability to mobilize celebrities, corporations and consumers to its cause. At the same time, however, critics ask whether this kind of “compassionate consumerism” (Kuehn 2008) is genuinely transformative, especially in light of the reductive effects wrought by the campaign.
According to these critics, the marketing discourse surrounding Product (RED) reinforces a series of social hierarchies that pivot on implicit distinctions between “us” and “them,” “first world consumers” and “African AIDS patients,” saviors and victims (Sarna-Wojcicki 2008: 14, Jungar and Salo 2008). In this discourse, Sarna-Wojcicki explains, “the empowerment promised by (RED) is limited to the shopping mall of the ‘first world consumers,’ excluding African voices from the ‘cause.’ … (RED), like other cause based initiatives, is claiming to raise ‘awareness,’ yet the topic of AIDS and Africa is rendered in monolithic images and reductive descriptions” (2008: 28). Cosmopolitan shoppers can thus buy into a cause without disrupting their own values and daily habits, without questioning their deeply held assumptions about the relationship between Africa and the west, and without committing to riskier forms of political activism.

Moves toward ethical or compassionate consumption underscore the fact that consumption is always political, but as the critiques described above suggest, they provide no easy answers about how a cosmopolitan consciousness should be mobilized into just, sustainable and ethical modes of engagement with other people. Cosmopolitan consumption may promote certain structures of feeling about “humanity” or the “world as a whole,” and indeed people may be deeply transformed personally by the cross-cultural encounters made possible by their consumption practices, but the extent to which feeling cosmopolitan translates into action, or even concern, on behalf of human rights or struggles for a better world and issues of global justice remains unclear. Is there transformative potential within cause-based consumption, or are “ethical” and “compassionate” consumption merely marketing trends designed to preserve the status quo? Can a viable cosmopolitical agenda for global social justice be attained through consumption? Or must cosmopolitical aims necessarily be pursued outside of the regime of consumption? These questions will remain central as scholars continue to grapple with the inherent paradoxes of cosmopolitan consumption.

Conclusion: Towards a Cosmopolitics of Consumption

One of the ways to make sense of the debates discussed in this chapter is to return to Hannerz’s (2006) distinction between the “two faces of cosmopolitanism, culture and politics.” It is clear that consumption, as a set of practices and as a logic, refuses to stay put on the “culture” side of this coin. Instead, the critical analyses outlined above bring our attention to the political dimensions of cosmopolitan consumption. In these accounts, consumption is revealed to be implicated not only in the political economy of capitalism, the reiteration of social inequalities, and the simultaneous appropriation and disavowal of difference, but also in claims to membership in global society and in forms of collective action and civic participation. In other words, the scholarship reviewed here suggests that the two faces of cosmopolitanism are joined, albeit uneasily, in a “cosmopolitics of consumption.”
A key question at stake in this cosmopolitics of consumption is whether consumption will be a friend or an enemy of cosmopolitan society (Beck 2000). Despite several optimistic gestures toward the political potential of cosmopolitan consumption, most of the scholarly critiques reviewed in this chapter seek to convince us that the more deeply cosmopolitanism becomes implicated in the commodifying logic of late capitalism, the more it will resemble what Beck (2006: 20) refers to as “deformed cosmopolitanism.” For Beck, “deformed cosmopolitanism” is not the result of the active pursuit of cosmopolitan political ideals, but rather is the unintended cultural effect of globalization, a fate that “merely befalls us” (2006: 20). In contrast, Beck suggests that a “non-deformed cosmopolitanism” emerges from “the sense of partaking in the great human experiment in civilization … and hence of making a contribution to world culture” (2006: 21). The task for a “cosmopolitics of consumption” is to better understand how consumption might be practiced as a way of participating in, contributing to and “re-forming” a cosmopolitan world culture.

Bibliography


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