COSMOPOLITANISM, EDUCATION AND COMPARATIVE EDUCATION

GUEST EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

ARTICLES

ESSAY

The Evolution of a Cosmopolitan Identity:
Transforming Culture

Shannan Spisak
Institute of International Education

This essay examines the evolution of cosmopolitanism in relation to the individual and the broader scope of society. Cosmopolitanism seeks to affect changes in cultural norms through the cultivation of self-awareness, identity, empowerment, and agency. Coupled with education, these powerful tools contribute to shaping a global society. Examining identity through the lens of gender roles and patriotism, it becomes evident that identity can be fluid, and cosmopolitan values can be universally applied. Cosmopolitanism transforms individual identity that, by extension, has the potential to transform the cultures and societies in which individuals participate.

A core value of cosmopolitanism is that all humans have equal worth. The recognition of equality of the other begins through one's development of self-awareness and acknowledgement of self-worth. From here, humans can influence and shape not only their personal identities but also, in extension, the identities of their cultures and societies. After all, from where do beliefs, traditions, and values originate if not from human nature, imagination, and construction? According to David Hansen (2008), "social change and, in particular, social improvement are inconceivable without *individual* response, imagination, and action" (p. 21). In agreement with Hansen's assessment, this essay illustrates how a combination of self-awareness, education, empowerment, and agency provides a framework for the evolution of identity and social change.

Cosmopolitanism indicates "a way of being in the world, a way of constructing an identity for oneself that is different from, and arguably opposed to, the idea of belonging to or devotion to or immersion in a particular culture." (Waldron, 2000, p. 1). A cosmopolitan sensibility reflects an emotional or spiritual process of evolution. Viewed as transformational practice, cosmopolitanism appreciates identity and culture as fluid concepts. Such fluidity creates power to transform the relationship between the self and other and leads to the potential to affect change within the broader scope of society.

Self-awareness proves a challenge to cultivate but is a primary component in the evolution of an inclusive perspective. It is linked to self-identity, and together these concepts illustrate the process of becoming or being cosmopolitan. An assumption made about self-identity is that it is a static label or defined description of an individual. Jason Hill (2000) raises concerns about the idea of a fixed identity:

> The contemporary self is to a large extent mired within racial and ethnic paradigms that define it exclusively in such terms. That is, the self is predicated on several assumptions…. included among them is the assumption that racial and ethnic concepts of self are stable, objective, and closed. Such views are also predicated on further assumption: that this sort of self is static and nonevolving. (p. 6)

Dale Snauwaert (2004) further illustrates Hill's concerns by explaining that the most prominent beliefs tied to self-identity are religious and political, and that identity can become so dependent upon these belief systems that a challenge to that system is experienced as a threat to one's own identity. These apprehensions can be countered, however, by constructing self-identity as a fluid, dynamic process of discovery. The understanding that an identity evolves over time provides a sense of flexibility and freedom to "become" – to become more cosmopolitan, compassionate, more sensitive, a better person, and so forth. As Hansen (2008) reminds us, "improvement in any domain of the human cannot emerge without individual initiative" (p. 22). The cultivation of awareness and initiative essentially represents the development of an identity.

Hill (2000) is uneasy with an individual's blind acceptance and promotion of pre-existing behaviors and attitudes coupled with a lack of critical questioning of consequences, which he defines as "paradigms of static identity" – whether ethnic, racial, religious, cultural, geographical, gendered or otherwise (p. 6). Defining one's self, as well as a group or culture by pre-existent standards, creates the idea that one's identity is static and, by extension, that the identity of the group or groups with which one associates self-identity are static as well. This can be problematic for many reasons, two of which are: 1) humans identify with or belong to more than one categorical group; 2) defining people and groups with fixed identities or characteristics encourages an 'us' versus 'them' mentality. Implicit in a fixed definition is inequality and a judgment between the 'we' and the 'they.' This dichotomy is a main consideration addressed in Hill's (2000) explanation that "cosmopolitanism is the attempt to get rid of a world in which Others are truly noncitizens" (p. 8). As the separation between self (or self-identified group) and other (or other-identified group) contradicts a universal approach to humanity, it can lead to the continued perpetuation of stereotypes or discrimination against others because 'it has always been done that way'; because traditions have dictated such behavior; or because it is the only way a system can function. Labeling others as enemies and opposing or excluding them can create conflict that is identity-based, "where people hate others who belong to groups different than theirs" and others are perceived as 'the enemy' (Harris, 2004, p. 11). Such a distinction provides justification for viewing others as unequal or for treating them with less dignity.

Because humans identify with more than one group or subgroup, it is troublesome to structure one's (or another's) identity based on only one or a small number of pre-existing identities. For example, a Muslim woman living in France belongs to multiple groups and might be defined in relation to her gender, religion, or nationality. Some characteristics of these categories may actually be in conflict with each other. Therefore, as individuals, humans begin to define themselves through a combination of traits adopted (or consciously chosen) from their related groups and sub-groups that reflect attitudes and personalities. This blending creates individuals who shape themselves with pre-existing identities adapted to suit their own uniqueness, and consequently have the potential to reshape the meanings of these categories. If a communal or familial expectation requires that a woman act or react in a certain manner, and a woman of that culture does not follow the norm, she remains a woman. By continuing to represent herself as a woman of that culture without conforming to the pressure on her, she re-defines how a woman of her culture exists and essentially who a woman of that culture can be. She has the power to contribute through the image she embodies, as perceived from within her own group as well as from outside. Again, Hill (2000) urges readers to "remember [that] we remake the world by individually remaking the images of our own selves" (p. 6). Through self-awareness, self-worth, and self-confidence, humans have the power to influence those with whom they come into contact, encouraging them to re-examine and question their understanding of what or whom they represent. This approach can be fostered in any individual in any group or subgroup, and is

one of the most valuable factors in transforming a culture of acceptance into a culture of change.

Humans choose to actively participate in culture by attempting to transform elements with which they are uncomfortable or passively accept the environment that has been structured for them. Culture cannot exist in a vacuum. Human participation is required to perpetuate the culture and the functioning of a human society; culture exists because of individual participation. As the cosmopolitan evolves, she becomes responsible for shaping the culture in which she belongs or with which she identifies. Sankar Muthu (2003) reminds us through his examination of Kant's writing that we "live in social and cultural worlds of our own making and remaking" (p. 135). This "remaking" is essential to the evolution of a cosmopolitan perspective and is the motivation behind the possibility of creating fluid cultural identities.

As a cosmopolitan develops her sense of awareness, and ultimately how her self participates in culture, religion, patriotism, democracy, she cultivates a sense of agency. Gerard Delanty (2006) is confident in "the belief that human agency can radically transform the present in the image of an imagined future" (p. 38). He continues, "the micro dimension of cosmopolitanism concerns individual agency and social identities, that is aspects of cosmopolitanism reflected in internal societal change" (p. 42). This sense of agency represents the root of cosmopolitan progress and the key to the transformation of self and cultural identity into fluid concepts.

Change of self as well as change of culture is achieved through fulfilling a sense of empowerment. Nanette Page and Cheryl Czuba (1999) suggest that:

> …empowerment is a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power (that is, the capacity to implement) in people, for use in their own lives, their communities, and in their society, by acting on issues that they define as important…Empowerment also occurs at various levels, such as individual, group, and community (p. 3).

Monisha Bajaj (2005) identifies the term agency as a combination of hope plus action, or the "belief in one's present or future ability to improve social mobility and transform elements of one's society" (p. 3). Incorporating the process of empowerment with her interpretation of agency advocates the idea that through the cultivation of a sense of hope, one develops a feeling of empowerment, which in turn leads to action. The consolidation of hope, empowerment, and action allows agency the ability to compound, presenting opportunities to transform or re-make cultural norms.

This process of transformation, sparked by empowerment and influenced by agency, has been occurring throughout human development, especially in relation to civil rights and social justice. In many cases, empowerment – especially in the political realm – is considered civic responsibility or participatory democracy, and is in certain forms already integrated within education systems and social dynamics. However, education does not often comprehensively promote self-awareness as the initiation to constructing a global consciousness. Nor does it draw on the connections among self-awareness, cosmopolitanism, and social behavior. This lack of a key motivation inhibits individuals from grasping the value of universal human worth. Using cosmopolitanism to specifically create the connection between self and other is a way to provide a consciousness that may be overlooked by focusing on each issue singularly. In this case, "other" can refer to gender, ethnic, racial, or political groups, or other living organisms – plants, animals, or the planet itself. Cosmopolitanism draws meaning from the individual and other decisions and actions outward into all of the dimensions that those decisions and actions affect, and prevents

feelings of isolation or helplessness that arise with situations oppressive to others.

Education is a key component in promoting the transformation and evolution of individuals and culture. The notion of cosmopolitanism "as a mode of learning about …culture and intercultural relations" explored by Fazal Rizvi (2008) presents a strong case for the necessity to shift from "the current focus of educational policies and practices that remain largely locally defined" to those that engage the global (p. 21-29). Rizvi's perspective, which stems from increasing global connectivity, outlines an approach for cosmopolitan learning that examines "how cultures are transformed by [globalization], and how our social imagination plays a central role in these transformational processes" (p. 31). Through Rizvi's work, it is evident that self-examination and reflexive understanding can be introduced through international education. He further determines that "instead of learning about cultures in an abstract manner, cosmopolitan learning involves pedagogic tasks that help students explore the criss-crossing of transnational circuits of communication" (p. 30). With a focus on cosmopolitan learning, the opportunity to transform culture expands as global interconnectivity increases.

Critics of cosmopolitanism fear that it competes with frames of reference that already exist, such as religion, patriotism, nationality, gender roles, or ethnicity; or that it promotes the homogenization of culture by reducing or removing unique traditional aspects of individuals and groups in favor of a shared universal ethos. These criticisms carry no weight when one uses cosmopolitanism as a medium through which to view already fixed notions of identity. It is possible that such pre-established frameworks can exist within the evolutionary scope of cosmopolitanism rather than in opposition to it. With the ability to essentially reshape the world in which they live, humans can therefore be expected to shift the pre-existing limitations in already established mind-sets to reflect a cosmopolitan sensibility through them instead of outside of them.

An individual who has developed her sense of self-identity and recognizes an injustice being done or perpetuated in her environment can exercise her sense of empowerment to affect change. The agency that she develops as she takes action to influence such change can start with the remaking of her own reaction to the injustice. If she consistently and fearlessly continues to maintain her own reaction (which can be inconsistent with her cultural identity or the social majority), she will force others to become aware of her alternative perspective. As she encounters increasing numbers in her community, she will provide an example of transformed behavior for them to follow. Whether a fellow citizen chooses to adopt her example of change or continues to exhibit the standard reaction is at his discretion. If fellow community members, too, are familiar with a cosmopolitan perspective, an introduction to a new approach or different view will cause them to re-evaluate their own attitude and reactions. The following examples will show that individuals affecting other individuals to induce a large scale societal change of acceptable practices can be effective across religious, political, and gender paradigms.

Gender roles in the United States have been traditionally defined with the female as homemaker and the male as financial provider. The systems and institutions in a capitalistic society have been developed to support and perpetuate this dynamic. However, it is becoming more socially acceptable for these roles (identities) to shift and transform. More women provide financial stability for their families while increasing numbers of men fill roles of homemaker and child caregiver. In response, the institutions functioning within this shifting dynamic are gradually remaking their cultures to respond and adapt to the demands that individuals have created. It has taken generations of women and men who hold personal beliefs that gender roles are not fixed or

static to initiate this change. They have shaped their self-identities in response to internal values, generated empowerment within themselves and others, and used individual agency to collectively influence change over a component of culture that had been accepted as fixed. Individual agency compounded as more individuals opened their minds to alternative possibilities in the family structure, and consequently gained enough momentum to begin a transformation of common culture. Not every American holds the view that gender roles can be fluidly defined; however, enough individuals and communities do to reflect the use of a cosmopolitan sensibility towards pre-existing notions of identity rather than in conflict with them.

The example of Patriotism illustrates the possibility of cosmopolitanism embracing a concept that is often viewed as conflicting with it. Citizens of any country can take a commonly held belief that the identity of a patriot lies in her ability to remain loyal to her country despite the cost, and to put her and her fellow citizens' interests ahead of those of the foreigner. Or, those same citizens can use a less exclusive definition of patriotism, and change the identity of what a patriot represents. Individuals who believe an alternate description can be used to identify the patriot can remake their own identities to reflect this understanding. The revised conceptualization can transform the identity of a patriot into an individual who is loyal to her fellow citizens and their collective interests, while engaging concern for others and the way those others will be treated as a result of that loyalty.

Through the development of self-identity and self-awareness one may reach a sense of empowerment and deeper engagement with one's culture. Cultivating a sense of agency to influence the shaping and remaking of culture may be the most valuable and promising aspect of cosmopolitanism. It can be positioned as an umbrella containing already-existing frameworks that are often thought to be in conflict, thereby removing barriers to its evolution. The overall hope for cosmopolitanism is not a universal homogeneous culture, but rather space for multiple individuals, communities, cultures, and societies to exist harmoniously. Its fundamentally transformative nature can be used to initiate a shift from a culture of accepting culture, to a culture of changing culture. Using individual agency to change culture and its mainstream beliefs and practices can result in a world positively shaped by humans in the best interest of all humanity. The practice of cosmopolitanism encourages individuals to protect and nurture their environment as well as to cultivate spiritual and intellectual growth.

References

Bajaj, M. (2005). *Conceptualizing agency amidst crisis: A case study of youth responses to human values education in Zambia*. Unpublished Doctoral dissertation, Teachers College, Columbia University (New York, USA).

Delanty, G. (2006). The cosmopolitan imagination: critical cosmopolitanism and social theory. *British Journal of Sociology, 57*(1), 25-47.

Hansen, D. (2008). The purposes of teacher education. In *Handbook of research on teacher education: Enduring issues in changing contexts* (pp.1-30). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Harris, I. (2004). Peace education theory. *Journal of Peace Education, 1*(1), 5-20.

Hill, J. D. (2000). *Becoming a cosmopolitan: What it means to be a human being in the new millennium*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Muthu, S. (2003). Humanity and culture in Kant's politics. In *Enlightenment against empire* (Ch. 4, pp.122-171). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Page, N. & Czuba, C. (1999). Empowerment: what is it? *Journal of Extension, 37*(5), 1-6. Retrieved July 27, 2007 from www.joe.org/joe/1999october/comm1.html.

Rizvi, F. (2008). Epistemic virtues and cosmopolitan learning. *The Australian Educational Researcher, 35*(1), 17-35.

Snauwaert, D.T. (2004). *Being peace, integral ethics, and peace education in a global society*. Paper presented at IPRA/PEC conference on July 7. Sopron, Hungary.

Waldron, J. (2000). What is cosmopolitan? *Journal of Political Philosophy, 8*(2), 227-244.