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Biographical Note

Dr Vince P. Marotta has conducted research in the area of multiculturalism, cultural identity and social theory. He has presented conference papers and published articles on Zygmunt Bauman, multicultural cities, hybridity, cosmopolitanism, the stranger and the relationship between democracy and diversity. He is co-editor and book review editor of the Journal of Intercultural Studies, published by Routledge. His current research projects explore the relationship between cultural identity, place and home and the perception of merit amongst Australian tertiary students.

Abstract

The Hybrid Stranger and Cosmopolitan Self

The paper critically identifies and examines the affinities between the category of the stranger & the cosmopolitan attitude/disposition that underlies recent theories of cosmopolitanism. I argue that the cosmopolitan attitude can be located within the sociological discourse of the stranger. Thus one needs to reconceptualise the cosmopolitan self in terms of the cosmopolitan stranger.

This new subject develops a more perceptive, broader and keener insight of the social world that is not available than those confined to a universalistic or particularistic perspective. The final part of the paper challenges this assertion through a critical assessment of the so-called in-between position occupied by the cosmopolitan stranger.
The Hybrid Stranger and Cosmopolitan Self

Introduction

The paper contributes to a critical discussion of cosmopolitanism by addressing how the cosmopolitan subject relates to the category of the stranger. The close affinities between these ideas become evident when we examine the cosmopolitan outlook/disposition expressed in the works of sociologists such as Ulf Hannerz, Ulrich Beck and Bryan Turner. The cosmopolitan attitude and in turn the cosmopolitan self are closely associated with Simmel’s and Bauman’s understanding of the hybrid stranger. The paper outlines the major characteristics of both these social actors and the emergence of new subject categorized as the cosmopolitan stranger. Cosmopolitan strangers develop a more perceptive, broader and keener insight than those confined to either a universal or particular perspective; they undermine binary logic and essentialism. The concluding section makes two critical points: firstly, that the cosmopolitan stranger’s engagement with difference assumes a passive other; secondly that there are inherent ‘prejudices’ in the so-called hybrid cosmopolitan position.

The Sociological Stranger

The importance of the stranger in understanding the human condition and cross-cultural interaction has been evident within social and political theory. The stranger has become the paradigmatic figure for contemporary society (Harman, 1988; Stichweh, 1997; Tabboni 1995), a society that, depending on one’s theoretical and conceptual framework, has increasingly become categorized as ‘high modern’, ‘second modernity’ or ‘postmodern’. The stranger also raises a hermeneutical problematic and thus can shed light on the sociology of knowledge (Jansen, 1980; Dessewffy, 1996). In these accounts social theorists juxtapose a descriptive account of the stranger with an analytical approach. In the latter, the category of the stranger becomes an object of critical inquiry.

In order to foster conceptual clarity a theoretical excursion into the distinction between the stranger and strangeness is provided. As will be shown later, this has implications for our interpretation of the cosmopolitan outlook. Discussions on the ‘stranger’ have implicitly or explicitly adopted a psychoanalytic, existential, sociological and spatial analysis. In some cases the distinctions between these approaches have been ignored and have resulted in conceptual confusion (Marotta 2000); the focus of this paper is on the final two perspectives because there are some close affinities between the sociological and spatial analysis of the stranger with the cosmopolitan self. But this comparative discussion follows a detailed examination of strangeness and the stranger.

The idea of ‘strangeness’ has come to be associated with a spatial process that describes the level of proximity and distance between social actors. Strangeness therefore exists when those who are physically close are socially, spiritually and ethically distant. On the other hand, the sociological literature on the stranger refers to individuals who are socially, culturally or racially different from the host and dominant group. In postcolonial, cultural and feminist studies this difference is synonymous with the experience of otherness. Although the sociological and spatial dimensions are discussed separately here, they describe different, but connected processes. In fact a more complex understanding of spatial strangeness is possible if we approach it terms of a continuum. The intensity of strangeness may depend on where one lies on the proximity and distance continuum. The feeling of strangeness is heightened closer to the distance point. In addition, strangeness does not necessarily
coincide with being a sociological stranger and not all strangers can be placed on the same point on the strangeness continuum. For example, at times young people can experience strangeness in the presence of their parents while not being categorised as sociological strangers. Moreover, long established European immigrants in Australia have economically, politically and socially integrated into the host society may be plotted closer to the social proximity scale than new arrivals from non-Western nations.

The work of Georg Simmel (1964) and Zygmunt Bauman (1988-89, 1995a & 1995b) provide the most perceptive and original accounts of the sociological stranger. These writers use the category of the stranger to describe both the relationship between Self (host/dominant group) and Other (non-member- cultural and racially different), and to highlight the impact that cross-cultural contact has on the stranger’s intellectual or cognitive disposition.

Sociological strangers are conceptualised as non-members. They are the cultural strangers who, in most cases, are excluded and marginalized from what is usually represented as the ‘in-group’ or ‘native group’. The experiences of the stranger, at least for Simmel, is epitomised in the life of Jews, gypsies, merchants and wanderers. Strangers, however, occupy an important social and cultural space because they are neither friends nor enemies: Bauman calls them the ‘hybrids of modernity’ (Bauman 1991) while Simmel associates the stranger with a “third party” who “indicates transition, conciliation, and abandonment of absolute contrast” (Simmel 1964b: 145).

Strangers may attempt to assimilate into the host group but they find it difficult to do so because they do not share the native’s assumptions or world-view. A stranger becomes essentially a person who questions nearly everything that is taken for granted by host members. This discrepancy results in a hermeneutical problem in which strangers cannot assume that their interpretation of the new cultural pattern coincides with that of the natives. It is this interpretative gap which constitutes them as strangers (Bauman 1995a: 126).

In-between strangers, who are physically close but socially distant, raise epistemological issues because they highlight the misunderstanding between Self and Other or between two culturally different life-worlds. This unresolved hermeneutical problem - the meeting with strangers - results in uncertainty, in particular uncertainty about how to read and respond to social situations. Consequently, the sociological stranger does not have complete access to the cultural and language code of the host.

What is pertinent is not the fact that misunderstanding occurs between the host and the stranger, but that the process of strangeness or the experience of nearness and distance promotes an interpretative view of the world that is not accessible to the host group. The position of strangers encourages a critical and ‘objective’ stance towards the host and one’s own culture. The belief that strangers perceive the host’s practices, customs and values from a less subjective perspective than the host allows them to critically reflect on those practices, customs and values. As a consequence of this experience strangers are also able to reevaluate and reflect upon their own group’s practices, customs and values. Their exposure to an alternative world-view makes them reassess their ‘home’ culture as less stable and fixed. What was once given is now contingent. This intellectual movement allows the stranger the ability to transcend conventional and ‘situated’ knowledge. The literature on the stranger, beginning with Simmel has constructed this individual type as disinterested third party. The in-between, third position allows strangers to see things more clearly and/or differently than those who occupy opposing cultural perspectives.

Strangers also adopt a form of objectivity that is not associated with positivism and the so-called neutrality underlying the scientific method. They dialectically adopt a frame of mind which could be categorized as a ‘subjective objectivity’ which emerges from their ability to be
both remote and near or detached and involved (Simmel 1964: 404). Strangers have a "bird’s-eye view" and are not immersed in the particularities of the opposing parties or cultural groups. This ‘bird’s-eye view’ allow strangers to adopt the particular views of the opposing parties, but be adequately detached from both parties to identify underlying common or universal interests.

Over the 20th century the sociological literature on marginal individuals or outsiders has reinforced the epistemological advantage of being a social and cultural in-between subject. In the early part of the 20th century the Chicago sociologists Robert Park was at the forefront in theorizing cultural and racial hybridity and its association with the stranger (Marotta, 2006). He observes that the hybrid self “becomes, relatively to his cultural milieu, the individual with the wider horizon, the keener intelligence, the more detached and rational viewpoint” (Park 1937: 376). Hybrid subjects adopt a cosmopolitan disposition because they are less nationalistic and thus “look across national boundaries” (Park 1934: 137). This alternative epistemology and perspective is not available to those immersed in the world-view of either the established or the outsider, either the native or foreigner. In these accounts of hybrid strangers distance and proximity become general features of our interpretation of the world (Schutz 1964 (1944): 105).

Cosmopolitanism and the stranger

In the mid 18th century the French philosopher Diderot connected the idea of the stranger to cosmopolitanism when he stated that cosmopolitans are “strangers nowhere in the world” (cited in Jacob, 2006: 1). Hannerz (1990: 248) also highlights the strangeness of cosmopolitans because they are one of us (proximity) yet they are different (distance). Finally, Turner (2001: 52) describes how historical trading depots of the Middle East were sites where strangers meet and cosmopolitanism flourished. Cosmopolitans are those at home in a homeless world. This rootlessness is the precondition for developing a “wider vision” because cosmopolitans reside in “no man’s land”. They emphasize detached inquiry, straddle the universal and particular and it “eschews binaries in favor of subject positions that strive towards the flexible” (Heydt-Stevenson & Cox, 2005: 131, 134-135). Cosmopolitanism, like the category of the stranger, hides internal differences.

Scholars have highlighted the problems of formulating a definitive definition of cosmopolitanism. Vertovec and Cohen thus adopt a multi-perspective approach to understanding the concept and they assert that “No single conceptualization is adequate” (2002: 3). Nonetheless they do argue that cosmopolitanism can be observed in six ways. As a socio-cultural condition, as a philosophy or world-view, a perspective which advocates transnational institutions, a view which highlights the multiple construction of the political subject, an attitude or disposition which is open and engaging with otherness and an ability to be flexible, reflective and move between cultures without residing within them. This formulation, however, does not explicitly examine the extent to which one dimension is related to the other. Are these characteristics mutually exclusive? Is one dimension of cosmopolitanism more likely to encourage another? For example, can the cosmopolitan disposition develop or emerge in a socio-cultural condition that is not cosmopolitan? These questions cannot be adequately addressed in this short paper; rather I want to focus on cosmopolitanism as a specific intellectual disposition.

The classic statement on cosmopolitanism as a state of mind can be found in Hannerz’s paper on cosmopolitans and locals written as a conference paper in 1987 and later published in 1990 in the journal Theory, Culture and Society. Hannerz observes that cosmopolitanism as a state of mind refers to a mode of managing meaning (1990: 230) which includes being open and involved with otherness. Such a mode of being in the world fosters the development of a cosmopolitan subject who is autonomous, masterful and expansive. The
cosmopolitan subject ‘surrenders’ to other cultures, but this surrender is not associated with a commitment to others (1990: 240). Engagement with others becomes an “aesthetic stance of openness toward divergent cultural experiences” and consequently it comprehends other cultures as works of art (1990: 239). Reminiscent of the intellectual the cosmopolitan adopts a “culture of critical discourse” which is reflective, questioning and devoted to the mastery of explicit and less ambiguous knowledge (1990: 246-247).

The work of Beck (2001, 2004) and Turner (2001) continues the association between cosmopolitanism and characteristics such as reflexivity, distance, openness, agency and a critical viewpoint.

Beck develops a cosmopolitan sociology based on a dialogic imagination in which the coexistence of rival ways of life is incorporated into the experiences of individuals. As a consequence of incorporating difference in one’s life, one is better able to compare, reflect, criticize and understand these contradictions. This imagination supposedly has a meaningful engagement with the otherness of the other. Beck links this imagination to Kant’s version of cosmopolitanism in which one is a citizen of the world. He contrasts the dialogic imagination to a national perspective or a mono-logic imagination. In the latter, individuals are unable to critically reflect on their action and are likely to exclude the otherness of the other in their ethical judgments.

The dialogic imagination explores the creative contradictions of cultures within and between imagined communities and adopts a methodology which rejects the either-or principle or binary thinking. It rejects this mode of thinking because conceiving the world in terms of binaries reinforces power relations between the dominant self and the subordinate other. Beck also addresses the idea of ‘rooted cosmopolitanism’ in which one is both simultaneously local and global. Unlike the cosmopolitanism associated with mobile elites, Beck argues that ‘rooted cosmopolitanism’ promotes an ethical engagement with otherness. This statement, however, is more prescriptive than descriptive.

Beck notes that in a globalizing world we need rethink how we understand and approach this world. What we need is an epistemological shift which will allow us to be open to pluralism and difference. The dialogical imagination encourages this epistemological shift by appealing to a “higher amorality” in which encompasses an ethical position that denies the superiority of one’s own morality while being open to divergent beliefs. In addition, a dialogical imagination involves a politics that is critical of the essentialising nature of nationalism. The cosmopolitan perspective, for Beck, thus fosters a subjectivity which is transcultural, hybrid, transnational and transgressive. This subjectivity develops a critique of our existing western society whose intellectual foundations are mono-dimensional, essentialist and binary.

Turner (2001) formulates a ‘cosmopolitan virtue’ in which social actors take an ironic stance towards one’s culture or nation but this is only made possible through the study or engagement with other cultures. Nonetheless, the ability to respect others requires a certain distance from one’s own culture. In response to the criticism directed at cosmopolitan mobile elites, Turner argues that the ironic cosmopolitanism is only possible if one has an emotional commitment to a place. Cosmopolitanism does not equate with the absence of a homeland; rather, it represents a reflexive distance from that locality. This self-reflexive distance from one’s own culture allows a meaningful understanding and engagement with otherness.

Beck’s and Turner’s cosmopolitan disposition echo the characteristics of the sociological stranger and its connection to strangeness. Firstly, it involves epistemic distancing but it also encompasses the movement between particularism and universalism which is evident in Turner’s idea of patriotic cosmopolitanism (Turner 2001: 59) and Beck’s rooted cosmopolitanism. The cosmopolitan disposition allows one the ability to be both socially and
ethically close but distant. Secondly, the cosmopolitan outlook echoes the ‘subjective objectivity’ of Simmel’s stranger because it develops an intellectual attitude to the world that is not available to those confined to a particular or universal position. Turner concludes that the cosmopolitan ironic stance is skeptical of grand narratives, while Beck argues that rooted cosmopolitanism transcends a universalist cosmopolitanism. The third position - which the cosmopolitan stranger occupies - fosters a critical view of binary thinking and the essentialist identities it fosters. Understanding the insider experience (host or local) is only possible through proximity and distance, through self-reflexivity and through an ironic stance.

The third position, the other and prejudice

Is such a third position – a dwelling between the insider and outsider perspective, between the local and global, between the particular and universal – possible? Such a position may possible but not in terms of how the cosmopolitan stranger is theorized.

The sociological discourse on the stranger and its association with cosmopolitanism raises interesting questions about the politics of representation, experience and the sociology of knowledge. Can occupying this in-between third position allow one to better represent the interest of locals/Others and one’s own culture? Does being exposed to difference encourage the development of cosmopolitan outlook? The discourse on the cosmopolitan stranger implies this is possible because locals, native/nationalist and the other are confined within their epistemological framework/prison. The implication is that the development of a cosmopolitan outlook is a one-way process. In other words, does openness and engaging with otherness mean that the other also can develop a cosmopolitan state of mind? It is not clear in the writings of the above authors whether this is possible. In the construction of a cosmopolitan subjectivity the other becomes a passive observer reacting to the needs of the cosmopolitan. This is particular the case in Hannerz’s account. Firstly, it is not always clear what he means by ‘engaging’, involving’ and ‘being open’ to otherness, especially when this mode of cross-cultural interaction lacks commitment to otherness (1990: 240). In these accounts of the cosmopolitan stranger it is never clear what the other gains as a consequence of engaging with the cosmopolitan subject.

The cosmopolitan stranger can synthesize and have access to a ‘total perspective’ not available to those immersed in their essentialist particular/local or global/universal frameworks. Cosmopolitan strangers are able to transcend ‘standpoint epistemologies’. Due to their flexibility and mobility they develop a ‘double perspective’ which encourages an alternative mode of thinking unavailable to those who are fixed within their particularistic or universalistic framework. Cosmopolitan strangers have the intellectual mindset to float between the local and the global, between the particular & the universal and thus transcend the politics of location.

Although the cosmopolitan stranger – as theorized in this paper - is able to transcend standpoint epistemologies, the in-between perspective collapses into another standpoint. In other words, while the role of the cosmopolitan stranger can be closely associated with the stranger’s ability to be both distant and close, to be subjective and objective, cosmopolitan strangers are not devoid of ‘prejudice’ in their understanding of the social world. Cosmopolitan strangers are interpreters of the world. Their unique interpretative power is fostered by their in-between subjectivity. The philosopher Gadamer argues that such interpreters are not totally in control of the interpretative process because the prejudices and fore-meanings that constitute the interpreters’ consciousness are not at their disposal. In Gadamer’s words, the interpreter “cannot separate in advance the productive prejudices that enable understanding from the prejudices that hinder it and lead to misunderstanding” (Gadamer 1997 (1960): 295).
Cosmopolitan strangers may find it difficult to be free-floating because they are embedded in the prejudices – in the hermeneutical sense – of their empirical social world. The perspective of the cosmopolitan stranger assumes that they are not affected by prejudices because they are not confined to either the insider/outsider or local/global perspective. This ignores the fact that cosmopolitan strangers are embedded; they are historical beings who are immersed in the attitudes, values and prejudices of their time and place. They do not occupy a boundless social and cultural vacuum.

The cosmopolitan stranger’s epistemological position is not devoid of prejudices and fore-meanings because it is these very same prejudices and fore-meanings that define who we are. Cosmopolitan strangers are not ahistorical social actors who float above those who are socially and historically located. Social actors, and their understanding of the world, are formed in the context of customs, traditions and prejudices. The idea of the cosmopolitan stranger assumes that one’s historical, social and cultural position can be placed on hold when analyzing and engaging a social world which is immersed in essentialist and binary thinking.

It is the ability not only to bracket off one’s values and norms, but to think in non-essentialist and non-binary terms that allows cosmopolitan strangers an alternative view of social reality not available to insiders and outsiders. They are in privileged position because they can transcend the ideology of essentialism and binary thought evident in the world of non-cosmopolitans. On the contrary, one’s cultural horizons, prejudices, ‘standpoints’, and the ideologies which inform them, contribute and hinder the process of understanding.

References