LUMEN 2014

Is Cosmopolitanism A Feasible Paradigm for Understanding Modern Art? A Methodological Proposal

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Abstract

The study focuses on two major points. The first seeks to address the issue of “cosmopolitanism” in the context of 19th century European history, with a short survey of the major theoretical and ideological features that have forged “cosmopolitanism” as a major political idea for the 19th and 20th century. The first point will also try to put an emphasis on the new theories that have revived the “cosmopolitan” thinking at the end of the millennium (with a special focus on Ulrich Beck’s theory of “cosmopolitanization”). The second point seeks to apply a new theoretical paradigm, following Beck’s analysis concerning cosmopolitanism, to the history of modern art. Our major thesis is that cosmopolitanism seems to offer a new way of interpreting the peculiar transformations inside the history of modern art in relation to the general, social, historical, economic development of Western societies throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.

Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of LUMEN 2014.

Keywords: cosmopolitanism; identity; difference; modern art; cosmopolitanization.

Introduction

“Cosmopolitanism” may be best explained as a view which designates the (political) living together of all human beings in a “single community”: “all human beings, regardless of their political affiliation, are (or can and should be) citizens in a single community” (Kleingeld & Brown, 2013). Different meanings of “cosmopolitanism” may be expressed by different readings of the term “community”: literal or metaphorical, political or ethical. Nevertheless,
there is a common thread in the philosophical theories concerning cosmopolitanism: each meaning of cosmopolitanism, however different, will focus on the “positive ideal” of the “universal” existence of a community of human beings (Kleingeld & Brown, 2013). However despite the different interpretations, “cosmopolitanism” is still alive and well, nowadays as present in theories that appear on the agendas of humanities or social sciences (Smith, 2007: 37 ff).

When put to the test of history or political theory, cosmopolitanism is, nevertheless, quite an elusive idea. Historians (Miller & Ury, 2010) try to define it as a modern concept with roots in ancient Greek culture. Miller and Ury, for example, define classical and modern cosmopolitanism as assuming the “tension between global and local, universal and particular” (Miller & Ury, 2010: 340). Throughout the age of “modernity”, “cosmopolitanism” has been usually related to the emergence of the “nation-states”. During its modern history, “cosmopolitanism” has been seen as the opposite of “nationalism” of the European nation-states. It was simply a voice of the “universal” set against the “particular” (read as “national”).

The disagreements concerning the relation between cosmopolitanism and nationalism that emerged between the representatives of German Idealism (Kant and Hegel, for example) had influenced the European intellectual life of the 19th century. Another German Idealist, the philosopher J.G. Fichte, saw patriotism (qua nationalism) as a case of cosmopolitanism in-the-making, contending that cosmopolitanism cannot be really achieved outside the nation. In his dialogue, “The Patriots” (1805/6), he solved the cosmopolitan-national dilemma by absorbing cosmopolitanism into nationalism, particularly German nationalism, in the end cosmopolitanism becoming an “exclusive patrimony of the German nation” (Miller & Ury, 2010: 341). The French revolutionaries of 1789 had already accepted a form of nationalism with a cosmopolitan twist, introducing it to French politics as a message of the French “civilizing mission” to the world. In European politics, versions of the Kantian cosmopolitanism – a project which saw the “federation of nations” as a feasible solution for appeasing the tension between nationalism and universalism in politics – will be adopted by the European “liberal revolutionaries” of 1848. In their own vision of liberal nationalism, the liberal state would serve as an enabler of the cosmopolitan promise of a “world citizenship” (Miller & Ury, 2010: 341).

Ulrich Beck’s Theory of Cosmopolitanism: “Cosmopolitanism” as “Cosmopolitanization”

It is particularly difficult, even nowadays, to agree upon a definition of “cosmopolitanism”. One of the leading voices of the “new cosmopolitanism”, the German sociologist Ulrich Beck (Beck, 2002), contends that “cosmopolitanism” is rather explainable as a process, than as an objective result. He prefers the term “cosmopolitanization” instead of “cosmopolitanism”. He stands for a “new” cosmopolitanism, a “methodological” cosmopolitanism, which he defines as “cosmopolitanization”. He claims that “there are no generalizable characteristics which allow it to be clearly distinguished” from other notions, such as “multiculturalism”. The “vagueness and equivocalness of [its] definition” (Beck, 2002: 36) gives to this new “cosmopolitanism” a positive advantage. Thus, “cosmopolitan” without the “-ism” is an inherently plurivocal attribute for which there are no “substantial founding principles”, such as “God-given order or natural law, or the common good, or reason” (Beck, 2002: 36). To be “cosmopolitan” without an “-ism” projects a certain limitation which makes this quality, being “cosmopolitan”, also difficult to defend theoretically. The inherent features of cosmopolitanism as “cosmopolitanization” will stretch the limits of its conceptualization. This is also why “cosmopolitan” without the “-ism” cannot be an “ideological construct”. Beck defends the distinction between traditional “cosmopolitanism” and “cosmopolitanization” or, as he describes it, “globalization from within” (Beck, 2002: 25). Instead, he argues for a “methodological cosmopolitanism” (Beck, 2002: 18), based on something called “dialogic imagination”, which describes the “internalization” of the otherness of the other, without assimilating it: “the dialogic imagination corresponds to the coexistence of rival ways of life in the individual experience, which makes it a matter of fate to compare, reflect, criticize, understand, combine contradictory certainties” (Beck, 2002: 18). Cosmopolitanism, as a method, is a way of thinking, an alternative to the monologic imagination: “the national perspective is a monologic imagination, which excludes the otherness of the other. The cosmopolitan perspective is an alternative imagination, an imagination of alternative ways of life and rationalities, which include the otherness of the other. It puts the negotiation of contradictory cultural experiences into the centre of activities: in the political, the economic, the scientific and the social” (Beck, 2002: 18). Not easily definable, the new “cosmopolitanism” is also agonistic,
presupposing a “dialectics of conflict”. “Cosmopolitanization”, the new, real and living “cosmopolitanism”, is basically a dialectical process. It becomes real when its “enemies” are around: “nationalism”, for example (Beck, 2002: 39). As such, the new “cosmopolitanism” is not just another concept which adds to the fluidization of the national-international “dualism” (Beck, 2002: 19).

“Cosmopolitanism” is thus seen as a process or as a way of thinking, rather than as a more or less defendable concept. It emerges as a reality (subjective or objective), rather than as a concept. The new understanding of “cosmopolitanism” pushes the theoretical boundaries beyond the national-international dualism. It really pushes beyond the basic distinctions, such as identity and difference, global and local, particular and universal. Read as a process of “cosmopolitanization”, cosmopolitanism will circumvent the “exclusion crisis” (Beck, 2002: 20), a sign of “monologic” imagination, as Beck contends. Monologic imagination will always seek to exclude somebody or something in its attempt of defining a thing, a quality, such as excluding someone from being a “subject of rights”, when it comes to the question of what a “subject of rights” is, etc. Cosmopolitan imagination, on the other hand, as a methodological concept, will break with this kind of distinctions. It will suggest an epistemological “shift” in viewing the relation between identity and difference, which, in its turn, will also adhere to a basic “ontological change”, characteristic to the whole social structure. This way, what will “appear as and (…) proclaimed as national” will be “in essence, increasingly transnational or cosmopolitan. (…) Social structure is becoming transnational or cosmopolitan; an epistemological shift is required in concurrence with this ontological change” (Beck, 2002: 29). The “cosmopolitan” way marks not only a paradigm (epistemological) shift, but also an ontological shift. Accordingly, our whole world, its entire existence, has become “cosmopolitan”.

“The cosmopolitan” Diversity and Modern Art

The question, whether it was a cosmopolitan reality that influenced the development of cosmopolitan tendencies inside modern art or the other way around, is still open. There is also an aesthetic cosmopolitanism which circulated in the intellectual circles of the Enlightenment’s thinkers and advocated for a so-called “universality thesis” in relation to all major aspects of aesthetic theory: the aesthetic object, the artist, the spectator. This aesthetic cosmopolitanism, which can also be explained historically, contributed to the further development of a cosmopolitan trend inside modern arts. According to its reading, the “object”, the “artist” and the “spectator” can be seen as “universal” in relation to aesthetic experience. Immanuel Kant’s analysis of the “cosmopolitan” universality of the judgment of taste and of the “ideal” aesthetic spectator are good examples of this kind of “cosmopolitan” aesthetic thinking at the end of the 18th century.

The cosmopolitan “consciousness” of modern arts and the cosmopolitan “reality” of modern life have been in a constant interconnectedness since the dawn of the Modern Era. “Cosmopolitanism” has influenced the field of arts not only as a “cosmopolitan form of consciousness” (Papastergiadis, 2007: 143), but also “ontologically”, if we agree to Beck’s thesis. Historically, the influence of a cosmopolitan reality upon the development of modern arts has begun at least since the end of the 18th century. The impact of international trade and international travel, access to different cultures, styles and ways of life exerted an influence upon the metropolitan life of the major cities. This process was obvious especially with nations which had large colonial empires overseas, yet not exclusively (see Agathocleous, 2011; Junyk, 2013; Wohlgemut, 2009). Cosmopolitanism is specific to all imperial capitals of the 19th and early 20th century: Paris, London, Vienna, Berlin, but also New York, Istanbul or Sankt Petersburg. Yet, the emergence of a social and cultural cosmopolitanism is generally related to the European imperialisms of the 19th century and to the development of the metropolitan cities in Europe which are also capitals of empires, such as Paris, London, Vienna, Berlin (see Said, 1993).

Recent authors (Regev, 2007; Papastergiadis, 2007; Chaney, 2002; Nava, 2002) have advocated the idea of an “aesthetic” or “cultural” cosmopolitanism, located “at the individual level”, and explained as a “cultural disposition involving an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness towards peoples, places and experiences from different cultures, especially those from different “nations” (…) or as having taste for “the wider shores of cultural experience” (Regev, 2007: 124). It is an interpretation of cosmopolitanism as a subjective reality, as a “form of consciousness” that involves a paradigm shift. According to the thesis, the “cultural” or “aesthetic” openness will transform the idea of cosmopolitanism into a cultural thesis. In this respect, “cosmopolitanism” becomes a useful
tool to cope with the unpredictability and difference which are so common nowadays in the cultural sphere. This new cosmopolitanism of culture will undermine the basic “premise of culture”, which “tells us that there is a distinctive way of doing things (…) which will be characteristic of a social group. These distinctive forms of life are usually imbued with moral force, often as traditions, and they constitute a central element in group identity” (Chaney, 2002: 158). In other words, the new “cosmopolitan” view questions the “in-” and “out-” of a certain “culture”. This thesis, in my view, is an appropriation of the idea of “cosmopolitanization” by the field of cultural sociology (See Regev, 2007: 124 ff.).

Cosmopolitanism as a Paradigm for Modern Art

Thus, cosmopolitanism seems to inform modern art starting from the Industrial Revolution onwards. Yet, the emergence of a cosmopolitan “heterogeneity” of tastes inside the modern artworld during the period of “high modernity” is only an aspect of a much bigger issue. If we consider Beck’s “cosmopolitanization” thesis as correctly, and not just a “cosmopolitan consciousness” carrying its own cosmopolitan methodology, but also a “cosmopolitan” ontology of modern life – aspects which are actually intertwined –, the “cosmopolitan” tendency within the artworld is responsible for the gradual dissolving of the traditional notional divisions appearing in the modern artworld, divisions which are basically threefold: political, aesthetic, and cultural. These boundaries keep the artworld within its known confines:

a. Political boundaries: national/international, European/non-European, Western/non-Western, North/South, East/West, empire/colony, etc.
b. Aesthetic boundaries: art/non-art, artistic/non-artistic object, aesthetic/non-aesthetic object, artist/non-artist, creative activity/non-creative activity, informed/non-informed spectator, etc.
c. Cultural boundaries: high/low, elite/margin, visual arts/non-visual arts, intellectual/non-intellectual, academic/non-academic, etc.

The existence of the “artworld” has been traditionally legitimized by these and other theoretical divisions. Yet, from the 19th century on, modern art has gradually begun to challenge its own identity. The emergence of new genres, new subjects, new styles, new techniques and new “foreign” influences into the modern life of the arts has influenced the artistic movements throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.

I contend that this “cosmopolitanization”, seen as a process, may occur, in the case of an artwork, in a threefold manner:

a. in the material of the artwork itself;
b. in the artistic technique based on which the artwork is produced;
c. in the social or political explicit (or implicit) “cosmopolitan” message that the artist (and its artwork) conveys.

Each of these three separate ways mentioned above (material, technique and message) may influence, independently from the other two, our decision to consider an artwork as “cosmopolitan”. That is why a particular artwork can be seen as “cosmopolitan” when at least one of its three above-mentioned features (material, technique, message) is deemed as such. In this case, we may have an artwork that conveys a “cosmopolitan” social or political message, but remains traditional in its technique, as well as in its material.

Conclusion

According to the thesis about “cosmopolitanization” (Beck), the process of questioning and dismantling of categories within the theoretical confines of modern art can also be read as a “cosmopolitanization” of the arts, or as the inclusion of the “otherness of the other (…) in one’s own self-identity and self-definition” (Beck, 2003: 17). Consequently, the thesis about the “cosmopolitanization” of modern arts can also be extended to the identity of the “artistic” object or that of the “artist”. What characterizes modern art as an essential tendency is ultimately its constant struggle for including the “other” into its own “identity”. We may thus read this process as a “cosmopolitanization”. It is a gradual and pervasive process of “assimilation” which, at the same time, changes the nature of the assimilating entity itself. The way in which especially the modern arts of the 19th century and afterwards the Avant-gardes will solve the conflict between the “old” and the “new”, “national” and “international”,
“identity” and the “other”, the “familiar” and the “uncanny” is to keep the “difference” within the new identity of the art object.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Babeș-Bolyai University grant GTC_34051/2013 (Young Researchers’ Grant Scheme) Avantgardistic Cosmopolitanism.

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