Cosmopolitanism

Uses of the Idea
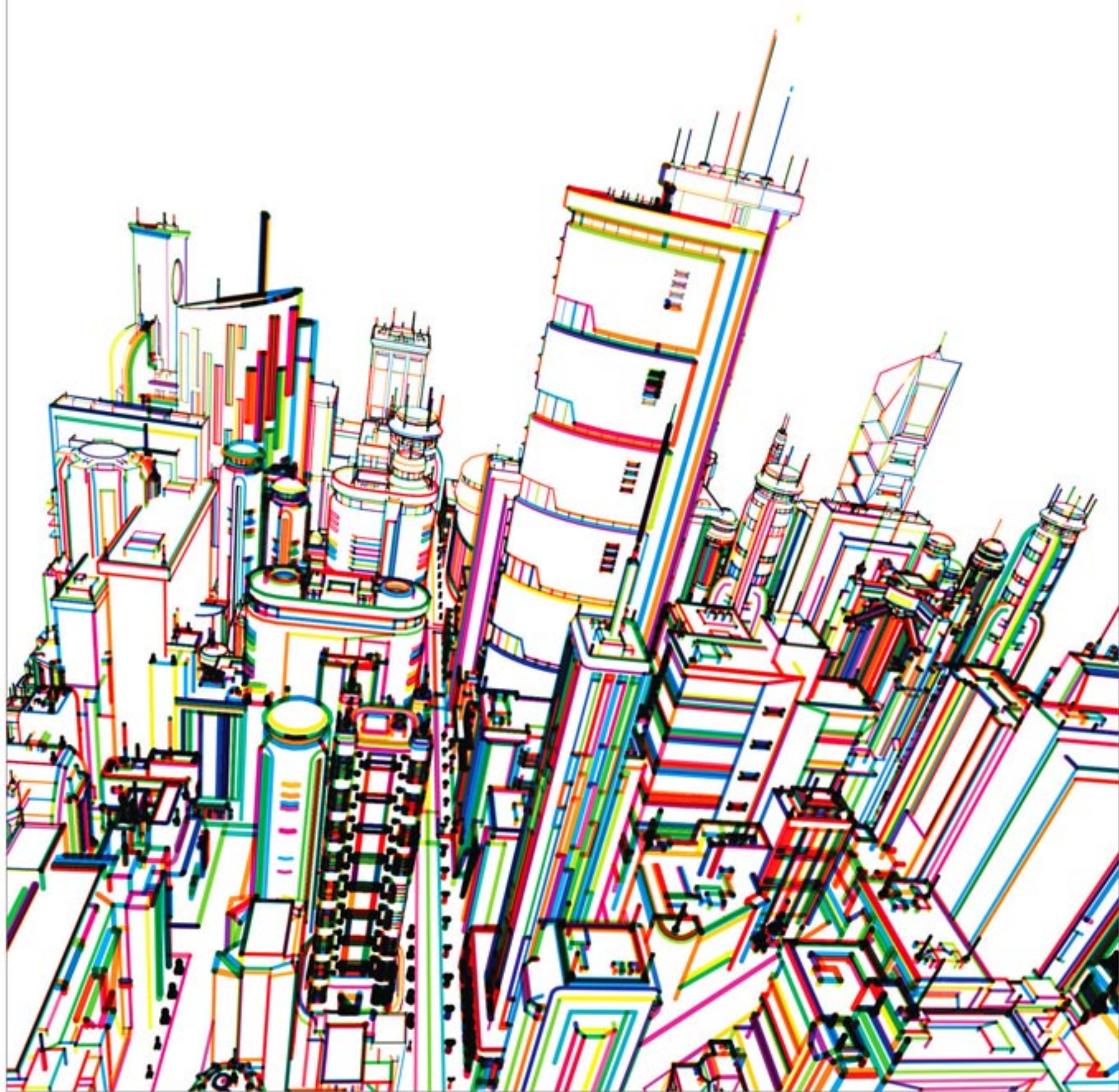
Zlatko Skrbiš and Ian Woodward

Cosmopolitanism

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Cosmopolitanism

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About the Authors

Zlatko Skrbiš is Professor of Sociology and Pro-Vice Chancellor (Research and Research Training) at Monash University, Australia. He is the author of *Long-distance Nationalism* (1999), *Constructing Singapore* (2008, with Michael Barr) and *The Sociology of Cosmopolitanism* (with G. Kendall and I. Woodward, 2009). His articles have appeared in various journals, including the *Sociological Review, British Journal of Sociology Nations and Nationalism, Theory, Culture and Society, Ethnic and Racial Studies* and *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. In addition to his interest in culture, theory and migration, he also has an extensive portfolio of empirical research. One of his major ongoing projects involves a longitudinal study of young people in Queensland and exploration of their aspirations around education, employment, articulation of their political and cultural attitudes.

Ian Woodward is Associate Professor in Sociology in the School of Humanities and Deputy Director of the Centre for Cultural Research, both at Griffith University, Australia. His research on material culture, consumption, taste and performativity is widely published. His reconstruction of the field of consumption studies, *Understanding Material Culture*, was published by Sage in 2007. Woodward also researches dimensions and practices of cultural openness and his research on cosmopolitanism (most of which is co-authored with Zlatko Skrbiš and Gavin Kendall) has been published in journals such as *Theory, Culture and Society, The Sociological Review, Journal of Sociology* and *The British Journal of Sociology*. Their collaborative research in this area, which connects classical sociological theory to ideas on mobility, hospitality, technology and community, *The Sociology of Cosmopolitanism*, was published by Palgrave in 2009. With a group of Griffith colleagues and an international team of authors, he is a co-author of the book *Cultural Sociology: An Introduction*, published by Blackwell (2012). Woodward has served on the Executive Board of The Australian Sociological Association. He is a board member on the new journal outlet, the *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, and an Editor of *The Journal of Sociology*. In 2010–2011 he was a Fellow of the Kulturwissenschaftliches Kolleg, University of Konstanz, Germany.

Acknowledgements

This book would never have been written without the invitation and encouragement of Professor Chris Rojek from SAGE. He continued to support this project throughout its rather long gestation period, kept his faith and allowed us some flexibility when required – and for this we are extremely grateful. The person who almost single-handedly ensured that the book managed to get to the finishing line is Dr Indigo Willing from The University of Queensland. Indigo has worked with us for a number of months and provided assistance when needed. Her job was made particularly difficult due to our frequent travel commitments in which she represented the Archimedean point when we were often divided by continents. We wish to acknowledge Indigo's remarkable competency and commitment and give full and unreserved credit for her input and support.

Zlatko would like to express specific thanks for the generous support of Manchester University for the Simon Hallsworth Fellowship during which much of the thinking for this book took place. The University of Queensland provided the circumstances which allowed him to continue this writing project despite a change in his job description. Ian Woodward, a friend and a colleague, deserves special mention for the continuing and long-term intellectual and professional partnership. As always, unreserved gratitude goes to Marta, Matija and Zala who endured his absences during the write-up. Like much of this writing which happened while travelling, he wants to specifically acknowledge Marta's support during the final stages of writing of this book which happened in Mykonos and Munich – a great testimony that nothing can dampen our holiday spirit.

Ian would like to acknowledge the generosity of the Kulturwissenschaftliches Kolleg, at the University of Konstanz, and particularly Konstanz's Center of Excellence 'Cultural Foundations of Cultural Integration', where he spent eight months over 2010–11. The Institute of Advanced Study at Konstanz is indeed a model place of cosmopolitan hospitality, and the perfect place to work on the deep questions this topic stirs. Here, Ian would like to express particular thanks to his distinguished colleague Professor Bernhard Giesen, and to the Institute's staff, including Mr Fred Girod and Ms Ana Mujan.

Preface

G.W.F. Hegel famously suffered from procrastination whenever starting the argument in a book. He would write distinctly long prefaces and introductions and in each of them he spent a great deal of effort explaining why neither prefaces nor introductions should be necessary. His point was that the author really should just start with the argument itself. We concur.

Cosmopolitanism is an exciting area of research to work in. There has been an almost exponential growth of scholarship on cosmopolitanism in the last two decades. To a large extent this trend has been prompted by an acceleration of processes perceived to create opportunities for the blossoming of cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitan encounters: increased mobility, the bringing-in-contact of different cultures at a scale not imaginable even few decades ago, and innovative experimentation at the level of global governance and in the context of supra-national initiatives. All these developments and the concomitant interest in cosmopolitanism are without doubt promising and exciting – after all, cosmopolitanism is often a subject picked by those who argue in favour of a productive engagement with difference. As a corollary, the growth of literature on cosmopolitanism also means that the field itself is becoming crowded and often difficult to navigate. The normativism of cosmopolitanism as a concept is often exaggerated and implicitly idealised, which makes it difficult to appreciate the analytical value of the concept. The aim of this book is to address this tension and hopefully make a small contribution to the clarity of the concept while also extending it in numerous innovative and illuminating directions.

There are probably two overarching sentiments which should characterise the idea of cosmopolitanism and give character to cosmopolitanism research. The first is that whilst cosmopolitanism is a big idea, it ought to be found in small things. We need to continue to look for the manifestations and possibilities of cosmopolitanism in everyday people and humble, ordinary encounters. The second, and one which we could not resist stating on several occasions in this

book, is the need to understand cosmopolitanism as something other than an end point, a hallelujah moment for social scientists trying to conceptualise a better society. Instead, we see cosmopolitanism as a process which allows us to move ever closer to the possible cosmopolitan ideal. There are failures and challenges on this road, but these should not be an excuse for nihilism and pessimism. Cosmopolitanism may be our dream, but the journey requires doing and engaging, not dreaming.

1

Introduction

A spectre is haunting the imagination of social scientists – the spectre of cosmopolitanism. Books and articles on the topic of cosmopolitanism abound and with this word reinserted into our vocabulary it feels as if the horizons of social imagination have shifted. No secret incantations are needed; the idea of cosmopolitanism appears to soothe the cravings for a better world, a world in which difference is a bridge rather than a gaping gorge, a choice rather than fate, and a hope to be embraced rather than a future to be feared. It signifies a world predicated on the principle of openness rather than closure, hospitality rather than hostility, and convivial cross-fertilisation where a Hobbesian *bellum omnium contra omnes* previously reigned supreme.

Instinctively, it feels good to see a progressive idea infiltrate the social science jargon. It seems as if cosmopolitan ideals are an inevitable next step from Hobsbawm's (1990) words at the end of his tractate on nationalism. There, he concludes his book with a neo-Hegelian prophecy that the time of nationalism is past its peak and that the owl of Minerva, which flies out at dusk and brings wisdom to the world, is now "circling around nations and nationalism" (1990: 192). He wrote these words at the time when the end of the Cold War and the confident strengthening of the European identity and its institutions signalled the rise of a cosmopolitan phoenix out of the ashes of turbulent history, giving hope and promise of a new social contract at the global level. For Beck (2012: 7) the era of cosmopolitanisation is well and truly upon us, and it comes with surprises that are transnational and global in both "their scope and implications". Our fates, regardless of creed, colour, class, education or geography are intertwined in the orgy of new, previously unimagined and unimaginable possibilities afforded by these circumstances.

Although inspired by different sets of concerns to Hobsbawm and Beck, Martha Nussbaum's [1994] (1996) far-reaching intervention in the discussion about the difference between patriotic and cosmopolitan education took courage from the same sets of historical developments. That historical junction exuded a sense of excitement, and it appeared

that the time for the reintroduction and blossoming of the idea of cosmopolitanism finally arrived, albeit well over two thousand years after its birth, when Diogenes of Sinope (b. 412 BC) announced: 'I am a citizen of the world'. Diogenes' statement lends itself to multiple interpretations, but there is no doubt that it represented a radical departure from the thinking prevalent in his time. It cogently professes a degree of detachment from the immediate political and cultural context as well as proposing a sense of openness towards the universal.

The term cosmopolitanism is increasingly commonly used, yet it continues to escape easy definition. Philosophers and sociologists alike find it notoriously difficult not only to define the term but also to agree on just who befits the label 'cosmopolitan'. We understand and are sympathetic to the definitional complexities around cosmopolitanism, but as sociologists we cannot accept that an agreement on the attributes of 'cosmopolitan' is so elusive that engagement becomes pointless. We suggest that there are four basic dimensions of cosmopolitanism that can easily be accepted: the cultural, political, ethical and methodological.

Cultural dimension. We concur with Nussbaum (1996) that there are different ways of being cosmopolitan, but what most cosmopolitans share is a disposition of openness to the world around them. We once apologetically remarked that this emphasis on openness is likely to sound nebulous and trite, but there is little doubt that a disposition of openness is a basic philosophical posture underpinning cosmopolitanism and a basic dispositional characteristic that most theorists of cosmopolitanism agree on (Skrbiš and Woodward, 2011). We find it at the point of its origin in Diogenes. We also find it in Kant's (1795, ed. 1983) classical conception of peace and hospitality. More recently, it was a central component to Nussbaum's (1996) argument about education which, in her view, must be inherently international and cosmopolitan in orientation. The conception of openness is for us an epistemological principle of cosmopolitanism: it limits and fixates the definitional horizon by reminding us that beyond openness lies a sphere of all things un-cosmopolitan.

Political dimension. Cosmopolitan commitment is also a political commitment, which encourages us to appreciate and recognise difference, embed our politics in universal principles and commit ourselves to the dethronement of one's unique cultural identity. This dimension extends into institutional and global domains when cosmopolitan political commitments aim beyond the local and particular and morph into institutionally committed cosmopolitan principles. At this global level cosmopolitanism refers to

an ambition or project of supra-national state building, including regimes of global governance, and legal-institutional frameworks for regulating events and processes, which reach beyond any one nation. Examples of this include the United Nations, the European Union and various regional political alliances – all imperfect, but nevertheless committed to more universal forms of governance that are driven by notions of common good.

Ethical dimension. This dimension is integral to cosmopolitanism in all its forms and is defined by an inclusive ethical core that emphasises worldliness, hospitality and communitarianism. In this book we will specifically address the question of cosmopolitan ethics in relation to two highly controversial social phenomena. The first relates to the way in which refugee issues are currently being dealt with. This case is instructive because it goes to the very core of the notion of hospitality towards strangers and how cosmopolitan openness is tested in practice. The second relates to a symbolically contested discussion about the veil in western democracies.

Methodological dimension. Because the cosmopolitan perspective seeks to extend social analysis beyond national borders and frameworks – and in particular, to analyse the fluid, relational and mobile aspects of social life on a continuum from the local to the global – some cosmopolitan theorists argue that a new type of social analysis is required. At its core is an argument which is not necessarily about the rejection of the nation-state's importance and relevance, but rather the embrace of a post-national and transnational perspective in understanding the forces of globality. The political and practical relevance of this move to become 'methodologically cosmopolitan' is that social analysis opens up to the relational processes which bind local and global, universal and particular, familiar and other. The result, it is hoped, is a social science which is better attuned to accurately describe the processes which form and structure the global world.

These four dimensions of cosmopolitanism are closely intertwined and we distinguish them for heuristic purposes only. In practice they are largely inseparable and this complex interdependence makes them an exciting sociological project. The accent here is on the idea of cosmopolitanism as a *project*. Cosmopolitanism is not a state of nirvana; it is not an endpoint of societal affairs. It is an ongoing effort of incorporation of cosmopolitan ambition through all its dimensions.

Cosmopolitanism has traditionally been conceived as embodying positive attributes which range from simple displays of openness to active embracing of diversity and otherness. But it was not always so. Hitler used the term cosmopolitan as a shortcut for the kind of people

who he perceived as not befitting his racial and political ideals. In the late 1940s, Stalin's regime initiated extensive anti-cosmopolitan campaigns and it saw cosmopolitanism as representing hostile bourgeois-liberal stances towards the Soviet regime, mixed with anti-Semitic and anti-Western rhetoric (Azadovskii and Egorov, 2002). But a generally positive, liberal and normative undertone is what causes the idea of cosmopolitanism to easily put one under its spell. Despite assurances to the contrary and anti-evangelical disclaimers, the proponents of the idea of cosmopolitanism often succumb to its normative promise, cleansed of the impurities of real life and projected as a shining example of human hope and universal fraternisation. It is the inherent seductiveness of the idea of cosmopolitanism that attracts a diverse range of interpretations and readings and encourages its proponents to spread the cosmopolitan imagination's wings. As we stated elsewhere about cosmopolitanism, "Its Stoic parentage, Kantian upbringing and postmodern spoiling have made it a robust but somewhat confused adolescent" (Skrbiš et al., 2004: 115).

Normative appropriations of a concept are not necessarily a bad thing. We know all too well that good ideas often thrive when going through an imaginative reframing of what has always been thought of as impossible or unchangeable. Yet, this unfortunately also serves as an excuse for many a cosmopolitan theorist to use the concept as if it were an elastic cord which can be stretched in every possible direction.

There has been an explosion of literature on cosmopolitanism over the past 20 or so years and the discussion has been vibrant and exhilarating as well as frustratingly self-indulging. The idea has been subjected to an avalanche of unprecedented 'adjectivisation' which has added spin to the idea of cosmopolitanism, but which has not necessarily advanced our understanding of it. While there is no doubt that different types of cosmopolitanism are observable, and that colourful adjectives added to the concept can be useful, the smorgasbord of cosmopolitan conceptual choices could at times be likened to a rich dish seasoned with competing and irreconcilable spices. Our own cursory review of adjectival enthusiasm revealed the following cosmopolitan attributes mentioned (not necessarily authored) in various sources: ordinary, practical and everyday (Lamont and Aksartova, 2002), vernacular (Bhabha, 1996), discrepant and comparative (Robbins, 1998), actually existing (Malcomson, 1998), working class (Werbner, 1999), moral, political, legal, cultural, economic and romantic (Kleingeld, 1999), minoritarian (Pollock et al., 2000), nativist (Kaufmann, 2001), everyday (Vertovec and Cohen, 2002), capitalist (Vertovec and Cohen, 2002: 314), mundane

(Szerszynski and Urry, 2002), casual (Gable, 2002), vernacular, rooted, critical, comparative, national, discrepant, situated (Hollinger, 2002), queer (Rushbrook, 2002), rural, plebeian, patrician (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan, 2003), gay (Binnie and Skeggs, 2004), pop (Jenkins, 2004), über- (Skrbiš et al., 2004), reluctant (Swetschinski, 2000), banal and reflexive (Beck, 2006), anti- and counter (Appiah, 2006), weak (Miller, 2007), vertical and horizontal (Beck and Grande, 2007), intimate (Mitchell, 2007), nationalist (Malachuk, 2007), feminist (Werbner, 2008), dedicated and pragmatic (Weenink, 2008), Aboriginal, anti-colonial, anti-imperial, anti-proprietary, emancipatory, feminist, from below, marginal, migrant, minority, NGO, non-elite, oppositional, popular non-Western, vernacular, working class, minoritarian and subaltern (Holton, 2009), political, identity, personal and commodified (Radice, 2009), Davos, Benetton, frequent flyer, imperial and dialogical (Mendieta, 2009), hipster (Roberts, 2009), instrumental (Ong, 2009), culinary (Johnson and Baumann, 2009), carnival and colonial (Skinner, 2010), eco- (Barbas-Rhoden, 2011), and then a host of other adjectives such as non-elite, one world, imperial, patriotic, discrepant, multicultural, left, consumerist, soft, attenuated and comparative. The list does not stop here. Not surprisingly, when reviewing the literature on cosmopolitanism, Mendieta (2009: 241) noted that it resembles "the veritable ruins of a tower of Babel".

This plurality and variability of cosmopolitanisms is useful although one can hardly blame naïve outsiders for remarking that writers on cosmopolitanism have more than their fair share of fun in linguistic wizardry and creativity. It also opens up perhaps uncomfortable debates about the extent to which a creative impulse pervading discussions of cosmopolitanism actually correlates with substantive and programmatic progress in cosmopolitanism research.

We refute any suggestion that our discomfort with conceptual inflation in cosmopolitanism research is a sign of an early onset of our middle-aged sociological neurosis, although we do admit preference for conceptual clarity. Nearly a decade ago we concurred with Himmelfarb's (1996: 77; quoted in Skrbiš et al., 2004: 115) ironic observation that the idea of cosmopolitanism has "a nice, high-minded ring to it". Yet, we also added that a concept that sounds good and makes a good promise "does not necessarily make a good analytical tool". The inflatory tendencies in the cosmopolitanism lexicon show no sign of abating. To make things worse, one can note with increased frequency a tendency to conflate terms such as multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism without actually spelling out the difference between