

Metropolis, cosmopolitanism and brokerage

Gilberto Velho

ABSTRACT

This article deals with some issues concerning the relations between metropolitan life and cosmopolitanism. It brings historical examples and examines contemporary situations, exploring recent changes in world life. It also deals with the themes of social-cultural complexity, heterogeneity, mediation, multiculturalism and their implications for different life styles. One of its main concerns, especially focused on urban life, is the general question of social interaction and sociability as a basic phenomenon of social and historical processes.

Keywords: complexity, cosmopolitanism, heterogeneity, mediation.

RESUMO

O texto examina algumas questões relacionadas à temática do cosmopolitismo metropolitano, focalizando trajetórias e subjetividades. Trata-se de refletir, a partir de autores clássicos como Simmel, sobre as descontinuidades entre culturas objetiva e subjetiva na sociedade moderno-contemporânea. Uma das preocupações centrais é identificar o trânsito entre múltiplos domínios e diferentes correntes de tradição cultural. Dá continuidade a trabalhos anteriores em que a complexidade e heterogeneidade socioculturais têm sido examinadas através de seus efeitos nas trajetórias de indivíduos e categorias. Dessa forma, procura-se repensar a própria noção de cosmopolitismo, contextualizando-o em termos históricos e culturais. Está em jogo o tema da mediação, que se manifesta na capacidade de transitar e, em situações específicas, do desempenho do papel de mediador entre distintos grupos, redes e códigos. O mediador, mesmo não sendo um autor no sentido convencional, é um intérprete e um reinventor da cultura. É um agente de mudança quando traz informações e transmite novos costumes, hábitos, bens e aspirações.

Palavras-chave: complexidade, cosmopolitismo, heterogeneidade, mediação.

It is by now common sense to associate the metropolis with cosmopolitanism. This has consequences for both scientific analyses and public policies at various levels. Cosmopolitanism would oppose localism and an almost pejorative provincialism. The *cosmopolis* could be an indication of a world without borders, with universalistic characteristics. One could perhaps talk of a *cosmopolitan ethos* with direct implications for anthropology as a discipline and a field of knowledge. This suggests an investigation of life styles and world views during various historical periods. We know, for instance, that cities in Antiquity as in Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria and others showed sociocultural characteristics linking heterogeneity and cosmopolitanism. Thus, historically, circulation, transit, exchange, interaction have all contributed to cosmopolitization. On the other hand, in modern-contemporary society at least since Romanticism, cosmopolitanism has been associated above all with individualistic values and perspectives. Who are, and how would behave, cosmopolitan individuals – agents and products of broader socio-historical processes, some of a *longue durée*, and others that seem to burst suddenly and powerfully into the present? To which extent one may, for instance, associate cosmopolitanism with the dynamics of currents of social tradition – to use Barth's (1989) term – and multi-ethnicity? Following Simmel's (1971) concern, it is also important to examine relations between objective and subjective cultures when dealing with the differences between a (in principle) self-referred localism and the universalist potential of a cosmopolitan experience unevenly distributed across the inhabitants of a metropolis. In this heterogeneous and complex experience, there is a coexistence of various social worlds and cultural currents expressing different ways of relating and interacting with reality, as well as multiple, simultaneous identities and belongings. Certainly, there are worlds that are more restricted and static, and others which are more open and dynamic.

In the remote year of 1971, I carried out an exploratory research among a population of Azorean origin in the Boston metropolitan region. One of the most fascinating aspects of this inquiry was to compare the differences, above all generational, in these immigrant families. In various situations, these were grandparents, children, and grandchildren. They all lived in one of the United States' most important urban areas, with a remarkable history and traditions. Classic studies developed there, such as those by W. F. Whyte (1973) and H. J. Gans (1969), approached all its sociological complexity and cultural heterogeneity. I believe that my chief reflections, stemming from what I had read and researched, pertained to the generationally discontinuous ways of *socially constructing* the reality in the universe studied. This had interested me during a previous research in Copacabana (Rio de Janeiro), which focused on trajectories in the city and in society at large, looking at the similarities, contrasts, and transformations in the middle classes' world views – which were not only generational, although these were very important. Schematically, it was possible to distinguish a tendency of perpetuating a scale of values associated with localities and

neighborhoods, bounded by tradition, and another one marked by change and mobility. These however often appeared in complex and contradictory ways. Based on this and other studies, I explored the notion of *field of possibilities* by integrating concerns found in works by authors who contributed distinctively to this reflection, among which Simmel (1971), Schutz (1970), Geertz (1973), and Bourdieu (1974).

Basically, it is about acknowledging the sociocultural borders and limits across which categories, groups, social agents and individual-subjects move, even in societies not marked by individualistic values. Thus, there are several important dimensions to be observed, including most prominently social relations tout court – such as participation in *social networks* –, and *shared meanings* in the cultural sphere proper. One should be aware that *social relations* and *shared meanings* speak to each other, and constitute a complex phenomenon to be approached multi-dimensionally.

In principle, the cosmopolitan experience is supposed to expand the universe of experiences and access to different world views. When and how is such cosmopolitanism manifested? In which social contexts and situations is it an important variable for understanding the motivations and actions of subjects, be them individuals or collective agents? Obviously, there are various types of cosmopolitanism that are historically and culturally differentiated as a function of circumstances, position, career, and social trajectories. In the abovementioned research, one would suppose that a worker coming from a village in the island of São Miguel would have a very distinct experience than that of an Azorean student in New England. The adolescent and young adults with whom I talked in 1971 avoided to speak Portuguese, while most adults presented serious difficulties with the English language. Some of the young folks of Azorean origin circulated in the so-called counterculture of that epoch, often making more or less regular use of drugs such as marijuana and lysergic acid. They interacted and related above all with native or immigrant Americans in their schools or at the university (Velho, 1994). There was certainly a dimension of experimentalism in these cosmopolitanizing experiences. Their daily life and rhythm, their differentiated activities and sociabilities involved meanings that were not necessarily shared by other members of their family and/or domestic group. This was the case of a young lady who lived for some time together with her older relatives under a so-called “altered state of consciousness” caused by LSD, establishing contrasts between perceptions by her family and the meanings attributed by her friends and generational peers. This implied, for instance, diverse representations of time and space with broader import for systems of classification and organization of experience into *provinces of meanings*, to use a term by Schutz (1970). Thus the travel, the process of migration, of settling into a new society and a big city are not translated into a homogeneous sort of cosmopolitanism to be understood as a linear and simple variable. In order to talk about cosmopolitanism in a more fruitful

way, then, it is necessary to qualify it. In cosmopolitan Copacabana, too, I have found various life styles and taste cultures (Gans, 1975; Velho, 1973, 1999) which made up a heterogeneous, complex and dynamic sociocultural picture. On the one hand, there was a social segment at which people from all across the world circulated, from sectors such as business, entertainment, arts and culture, among others. Their references were clearly international. To travel across the world was a routine activity, and they were part of intercontinental social networks. They would speak at least one foreign language, sometimes three or four – just as the social elites of cosmopolitan second and third century Palmira who, according to Paul Veyne (2009), spoke Greek, Latin and Aramaic. On the other hand, there were individuals and families coming from more distant neighborhoods, the city's outskirts, smaller towns or other regions in Brazil. These would be mostly classified as suburban or provincial people, although the presence of members of regional elites should be remarked; these had sociocultural characteristics which distinguished them from more modest migrants. These were businessmen, politicians, higher level state officials – it should be recalled that, until 1960, Rio de Janeiro was the capital of Brazil. For almost two centuries, this city was the country's political, administrative, and cultural center, and – until the rise of São Paulo in the mid-twentieth century – Brazil's most populous city and main economic pole. As such, it was home to diplomatic representations and major international meetings. To be cosmopolitan, from the standpoint of the individuals, would mean to be able to access different codes, cultures, life styles, world views, and so forth. It is important to repeat that this may come from various sources. The trader who travels the world, the adventurer who journeys various continents, the diplomat, the sailor are prototypes of individuals who, in principle, have the potential for developing a less localist perspective. But on the other hand, travelling would not have the magical effect of transforming the individuals, of dissolving their socialization by annulling values, beliefs, prejudices, tastes previously constituted by their participation in an original milieu and culture.

At stake here is a sociocultural plasticity manifested in the capacity to transit and, in specific situations, to play a brokerage role between different groups and codes. Cosmopolitanism may be interpreted as an expression of this phenomenon which is not only spatial-geographic, but which has a potential for developing the capacity and/or empathy for perceiving and decoding points of view and perspectives by social categories, cultural currents, and particular individuals. Without discarding explanations of a psychological nature, and even acknowledging the possibility of building bridges with them, our focus is on the trajectories, life histories and relations between objective and subjective cultures. The Brazilian writer Machado de Assis, for instance, constructed a world of characters and situations of a complex and multifarious humanity without ever leaving Rio de Janeiro (he went only as far as Petrópolis), through his knowledge of the literature and his capacity for observation and reflection. What to say about the cosmopolitanism of Cicero, Dante,

Camões, Shakespeare, Balzac, Proust, Borges, each in his own time and circumstance? What is permanently at stake here is the possibility of communicating and engaging in dialogue with different traditions such as Western literature, bearer of meanings and values associated with a particular socio-historical memory. Is intelligentsia cosmopolitan by definition? This is certainly a problematic question if one takes into account recent xenophobic and racist formulations stemming from diverse intellectual productions. One cannot ignore a certain kind of cosmopolitanism that subscribes to stereotypes, colonialism, and imperialism. To be an intellectual does not imply adhering to universalism of a liberal and/or progressive kind, neither is cosmopolitanism a virtue in itself. I believe it is worth insisting on the idea of brokerage as a socioanthropological phenomenon. The broker, even though not an author in the conventional sense, is an interpreter and a re-maker of culture. He is an agent of change when he brings, for better or for worse, information and transmits new costumes, habits, goods and aspirations by means of his objective and/or subjective cosmopolitanism. Nowadays, this can be done via rapid international trips or even while sitting in front of a computer screen, by potentially accessing an almost unlimited repertoire of data, news, general information. It is important to remark that such uses are highly unequal in terms of the users' backgrounds, cultural capital and trajectories. To navigate on the web does not automatically confer a cosmopolitan passport. A fundamental point is to resume the idea of multiple belongings. People have complex experiences, move across multiple sites, articulate in diverse networks; their identities are not homogeneous, neither do they develop unilinearly. Thus, we could say that there are no "pure" cosmopolitans; the domestic, local, provincial, self-referred, endogamic side reappears or is always present in particular contexts and situations. The ancestors' village, the old neighborhood, the paternal home and their memories are well-known and common examples of important identitarian anchors.

Another compelling issue is to relate cosmopolitanism not only with Simmel's (1971) abovementioned notion of subjective culture, but also with the *Bildung* problematic and the unfoldings of German philology and philosophy in the works of authors such as Herder, Humboldt, or Nietzsche. Certainly, Simmel's work bears relation with this tradition of thought, itself full of polemics, lineages, and currents. We may ask, thus, whether the cosmopolitan experience contribute to the improvement and development of individual, social and cultural potentialities. How to compare different cultures or streams of cultural traditions in these terms? To which extent are notions such as *Bildung* and self-cultivation expressions of a Western universalistic humanism? Or rather, is it possible to deploy them along an anthropological train of thought, sustained by the notion of cultural relativism? By assuming the problematic of diversity, sociocultural pluralism, hybridism, among other renditions of the privilege of the value of difference, how one deals with the classic heritage of universalistic literary humanism, frequently associated as it is with

hierarchical conceptions of culture? The development of individual potentialities within this tradition would point to a social utopia in which society(ies) as a whole would be made up of fully developed individuals with fulfilled competences and capacities. This has been one of the fundamental dilemmas of contemporary humanism: how to deal, on the one hand, with the multiplicity of cultures and their relations with nature and, on the other, with the fragmentation, inequalities and conflicts of modern-contemporary society, especially in the metropolis. For the sake of illustration, one could recall, among the various political, economic and cultural cosmopolitanisms with which we live, the existence of international crime and mafias, organized in complex and efficient networks. Cosmopolitanism is therefore not synonymous with a spiritual aristocracy, neither with sociocultural refinement. It may be an instrument, a way of life supporting strategies for accumulating material and immaterial resources, including prestige and power. In its various versions, it may be associated with life styles that inscribe frontiers of status; but it may also be a diffuser of information and ideas which might contribute to more democratizing forms of exchange, to the establishment of new bridges between different cultural levels. On the other hand, the cosmopolitan may be a polyglot without ever giving up his ethnocentrism, as long as he remains attached to world views ill-adapted to dealing with the new, the transnational, and the different. On the negative side, the cosmopolitan life style may be regarded as superficial, rootless and detached from deeper regional and/or national foundations. Rather than meritorious, internationalism and universalism would be signs or symptoms of lack of commitment with the domestic world of the family, appearing as “inauthentic” as opposed to the “authenticity” of local, continual and long-lasting experiences involving close and dense relationships. As already mentioned, perceptions of the foreigner and of the “external world” as a physical and symbolic menace are well known, and sometimes tragically experienced. Barriers, prejudices and aggressiveness may take on multiple forms.

Ultimately, among all these possibilities and controversies, I seek to underline the cosmopolitan experience’s potential for dialogue, be it at the level of subjective culture and material relations, be it in the relations established between different subjects when negotiating reality and thus constructing it as part of an unbroken process. In this sense, the extension of networks of relations and the multiplication of interactions could translate into enrichment, especially in terms of individual valorization and subjective culture, by intensifying and deepening the experience of belonging to and participating in a broader, reassessed and socially renovated collectivity capable of facing the contemporary world’s threats, violences, and risks. This multicultural and multiethnic humanism recuperates the ancient idea of cosmopolitanism, which finds its best possibilities of expression in the metropolis by means of public policies implementing and strengthening spaces and circumstances for democratic dialogue. Anthropology, with its unavoidable ups and downs, has

a fundamental contribution to make to the assessment of the various facets and contradictions of cosmopolitanism by means of the notion of culture, with all its revisions and reinterpretations. The indefinite and sometimes overrated globalization adds interesting elements for evaluating the social and individual dimensions of cosmopolitanism in terms of its changes and the reactions that it causes. On the other hand, brokerage is a fundamental phenomenon not only for building bridges across those who are different, but, by reinventing codes, networks of meanings and social relations, for expanding and developing a new and more complex conception of citizenship. There are many styles of brokerage – from active agents who play a direct part in politico-social movements and mobilizations to intellectuals, scientists, authors and artists who, through their researches and reflections, contribute to broadening horizons and renewing forms of communicating and establishing dialogue. These forms may combine and complement each other, even though there might also be conflict and clashes. On the other hand, persistent resistances, prejudices and obstructions are found not only in particular social categories and groups, but in the trajectories and experiences of complex and contradictory individuals.

Thus, when celebrating anthropology's possible cosmopolitan ethos, it is important to pay heed to the well-known tyranny of circumstances, which imposes limits upon all of us.

References

BARTH, F. The analysis of culture in complex societies. *Ethos*, v. 54, n. 3-6, p. 120-142, 1989.

BOURDIEU, P. *A economia das trocas simbólicas*. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1974.

GANS, H. J. *Urban villagers: group and class in the life of Italian-Americans*. New York: The Free Press, 1969.

GANS, H. J. *Popular culture and high culture: an analysis and evaluation of taste*. New York Basic Books, 1975.

GEERTZ, C. *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.

SCHUTZ, A. *Alfred Schutz on phenomenology and social relations*. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1970.

SIMMEL, G. *On individuality and social forms*. Ed. Donald Levine. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971.

VELHO, G. *A utopia urbana: um estudo de antropologia social*. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 1973.

VELHO, G. *Projeto e metamorfose: antropologia das sociedades complexas*. Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 1994.

VELHO, G. Os mundos de Copacabana. In: VELHO, G. (Org.). *Antropologia urbana – cultura e sociedade no Brasil e em Portugal*. Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 1999. p. 11-23.

VEYNE, P. Palmira e Zenóbia entre o Oriente, a Grécia e Roma. In: VEYNE, P. *O Império Greco-Romano*. Rio de Janeiro: Campus, 2009. p. 128-179.

WHYTE, W. F. *Street corner society: the social structure of an Italian slum*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973.

Translated by Letícia Cesarino

Translated from **Horizontes Antropológicos**, Porto Alegre, v.16, n.33, p. 15-23, jun. 2010.