Cultural Capital in a Global Cosmopole

Baz Lecocq, Ghent University

For the moment (May 2011), this paper consists of excerpts from a previously published text, the main argument of which I wish to rework and expand. Presentation here is for feedback purposes only. Citation or reference to this paper is prohibited. For reference to or citation of the original text, see Lecocq, Baz. "Tuareg City Blues - Cultural Capital in a Global Cosmopole." In *Tuareg Society within a Globalized World: Saharan Life in Transition*, edited by Ines Kohl and Anja Fischer, 41-58. London: I.B. Tauris, 2010. **All comments and suggestions are welcome. Please send to: baz@lecocq.nl**

This presentation explicitly wants to be a discussion paper. As such, it will not be a presentation based on extensive ethnographic, archive or other data, but more of an essay. I would like to compare the advantages and disadvantages of individual 'Africans' and 'Westerners' (in this essay a very broad category including broadly the Northern Atlantic and the Pacific Rim, but excluding South-East Europe) in global movement, through the notions of globalisation and cosmopolitanism. I propose to reserve the term globalisation for the material realm and to use the term cosmopolitanism to define and describe the social and cultural realm of human global interaction and adaptation. Especially left leaning scholars see humans as subordinate or having been made subordinate to capital within globalisation. At worst, they are seen as part of that capital in human form (human resources or human capital), and at best as owning or controlling capital (with capital remaining primary). In this view, Africans in general, and poor Africans especially, are strongly disadvantaged to Westerners who dominate the global scene, and who seem unwilling to relegate. This imbalance finds expression in Europe in discourses on illegal immigrants who come to 'profit' and against whom walls should be erected around 'fortress Europe', and in Africa in discourses on Europe as a land of milk and honey, or a land that should seek redemption for its colonial sin in sharing its wealth. Against this image, I would like to place another observation, namely that over the previous century, 'Westerners' have lost a large number of assets useful in living a global cosmopolitan life, whereas 'Africans' have kept these assets, expanded them and are now putting them to use. These assets can be described as personal networks and the capacity of adaptation. I would like to argue that the essential element shaping the participation of groups and individuals in patterns of globalisation and the creation of the cosmopolitan is not to be found in the form of mobility or the access to capital, but in the shape, constitution and potential of human networks created through (ac)culturalisations or the transformation of 'cultural capital'.

I will here follow a school of thought that reserves the term globalisation largely for the economic and material world to which people are subjected, while using cosmopolitanism to describe the human world of discursive, social and economic practices constituting their agency in a globalising world. In this sense, cosmopolitanism serves as a counterweight to globalisation, while being partly the results derived from the changes in the economic material world. Cosmopolitanism can best be described with Ulf Hannerz' definition of 'competence, a personal ability to make one's way into other cultures, through listening, looking, intuiting and reflecting', as well as by a skill to manoeuvre through

different systems of meaning.1 The idea of globalisation used here will be derived from Mbembe's ideas as a compression, domestication and utilisation of space and the appropriation and domestication of world time in interlacing temporalities.2 More practically put, it is the growing global exchange of people, goods and ideas, facilitated by ever more rapid and cheaper means of mass communication and mass transportation and international treaties and law. This compression is not a new phenomenon, only its increasing scale and speed justify its noted importance in the present-day world.
I would like to argue that the essential element shaping the participation of groups and individuals in patterns of globalisation and the creation of the cosmopolitan is not to be found in forms of mobility, but in the shape, constitution and potential of human networks. It should be asked first of all not how people go where they go, but why people go where they go and, means of transport aside, how they get there. The principal answer as developed in migration studies, in fact one of the few answers scholars of migration generally agree upon, tends to be: because they know people there who asked them to come and informed them how to get there. Most scholars of migration studies also agree upon the fact that in the Western world most mobility is capital intensive and induced in professional networks driven by finance, whereas in the rest of the world, most mobility is capital extensive and induced in social networks, where social capital is the most important asset. This is where Africans have the advantage, or rather, where their global movements become more cosmopolitan than those of Westerners. I should nuance this statement immediately by indicating that with 'the West' here is meant the North-Western Atlantic and the Austraulasian axis of Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Australia and New- Zealand. The (labour) migration of South-Eastern Europeans has much more in common with African labour migration than with that of the North Atlantic, with the exception of their legal status within the EU.
Over the 20th century, primary social networks, or social capital, have shrunk considerably in the Western world. Referring to Alain Touraine, Sennett points out that in the Western World

'… *a class difference appears between those laborers – mostly immigrants in the informal, or "gray", sectors of the economy – who find room for themselves in a fluid or fragmented economy and those traditional working-class people, once protected by pyramidal unions or employers, who have less room for manoeuvre. [...] The institutional model of the future does not furnish them a life narrative at work, or the promise of much security in the public realm.* In the network society, their informal networks are thin.' 3 (Sennett 2006:132, my italics)

The retreat into the nuclear family, the severance of extended family ties and weakening notions of family support have practically meant a severe reduction of network possibilities. Likewise,

1 Hannerz 1990, cited in Vertovec & Cohen, 2000:13.
2 Mbembe 2000.
3 Sennett 2006.

secularisation has led to a reduced network of co-religionists and social (or even financial) support from the parish.4 Even work related networks have diminished in importance in a society heavily geared to economic performance and short-term financial output than to social capital. Trade union memberships have declined in number over the past few decades in most European countries leaving workers without these contacts. The decreasing power of the Trade Unions due to their inefficient reaction to the globalisation of labour (outsourcing, relocation etc.) strengthens this trend of diminishing social capital. Traditional political networks have declined in size and importance. Most national political parties have seen their adherence drop, while even the historically international oriented labour and liberal parties have been unable to strengthen international contacts and collaboration despite the opportunities presented by the European Union institutions.

On a larger historical scale too, possibilities to live a cosmopolitan life have shrunk considerably in the heartlands of the Western world as a result of the advance of the nation and the nation-state, and the resulting demise of ethnic and linguistic diversity. The uniformity in culture instated by nationalist ideology and practice, has only recently been challenged in many Western countries by migration patterns introducing new populations with a culturally different background. The responses to this development vary, between an explicit multicultural policy of mutual adaptation in Canada, to accommodation through 'political correct' discourse in public space and 'positive discrimination' policies without challenging the supremacy of the dominant WASP culture in the US, and outright hostile retreat in nationalist and xenophobic political discourse in Western Europe.

This leaves the shaping of Western global movement and cosmopolitanism to few domains. First there is what has been labelled the 'creative class', a true cosmopolitan crew of artists, academics and product developers, who are prepared to seek inspiration in cultural cross over and the migration to cheap and bustling cities. Second there is the world of global economics, finance and business. It has been noted that, although moving global, this particular class is both homogenous in its worldview and common culture which is a 'specialized and - paradoxically - rather homogenous transnational culture, a limited interest in engaging defined spaces in global cities'.5 This group has been labelled 'cosmocrats', a financial global elite which is mobile but, in its utter stereotype, inhabits a uniform space of internationally standardized airports, hotels and workspaces, eats an international diet of sushi, cabernet sauvignon and latte macchiato, 'works out' and plays golf.6 These two particular global or cosmopolitan lifestyles are fully dependent on professional networks, and can only expand within that professional realm. Other networks cannot be included in this lifestyle. A last option to a global or cosmopolitan mobility is tourism. This particular movement is not characterized by network possibilities or active economic participation. Rather, it is a strictly consumptive and transactional

4 With secularisation is here meant the decline in active or formal adherence to a traditional church denomination. The rise of evangelical media churches, with their unidirectional interaction between preacher and spectator, does not replace the traditional parish as a primary network of support.

5 Vertovec & Cohen 2002.

6 Micklethwait & Woolridge 2000.

form of movement. It can be argued that it is not cosmopolitan as defined above, as the only agency involved is a travel agency.

The last two important settings of Western global mobility are the interconnected domains of development, humanitarian aid, and military missions. Of the aid world, it can be said that it entails a truly cosmopolitan setting where local victims and global aid organize an encounter in which both need to adapt to an unknown cultural and physical condition. Yet closer scrutiny of the humanitarian world learns that the aid encounter conditions are similar, not to say uniform worldwide and largely dominated by Western principles of organization and discourses on need. In many ways, the encounter is unilateral. The last domain is that of military missions. All missions, legitimized by international law or not, are based on Western geopolitical hegemony, organization, and discourse. Most UN endorsed peace keeping missions involve a majority of non Western troops, but here too, Western hegemony and the unilateral encounter are visible in the structure of the military camp, where the centre is formed by military equipment and troops from the West, surrounded by a ring of non Western troops and an outer periphery of locally hired mercenary security personnel at the gates.7

In short, due to their perceived hegemony in globalization processes, the cosmopolitan encounters of the Western world are unilateraly hegemonic and largely taking place in homogenous, uniform settings, created by the West, requiring the non Westerners involved to adapting to Western perceptions, discourses, practices and tastes.

It has been argued that cosmopolitanism originates in a confluence of Western nationalism and imperialism, and is twin with Christian missionary zeal, of which development work and even the present day capitalist belief in the blessings of the free world market are offshoots.8 I would like to argue however, that those Africans and other non-Westerners who do not partake in the encounters sketched above have options to other forms of cosmopolitan mobility that are specific to their own conditions and the shape of their networks. We can indeed discern between cosmopolitanism from above and from below. The number of Africans partaking in the 'cosmocrat' lifestyle is, although not entirely absent, limited. Contrary to the European experience, primary social networks have only expanded for Africans over the past century. The extended family is still a fully functional social and economic unit of mutual support, which extends further into village, ward or tribal affiliation, and beyond that into ethnic solidarity, where Europeans only rely on a vague recognition of national solidarity. Religious networks have greatly expanded too. Both Christian and Muslim missionary activity since the 18th century has enlarged the possibilities for Africans to partake in global networks of solidarity. Pentecostal and revivalist Christian organizations from the Americas promulgate their activities in Africa, creating new religious cosmopolitan practices in which Africans partake. The recent activity of Muslim *Da'wa* organizations, such as the *Tablighi Jama'at* or the World Islamic Mission, have strengthened existing ties between Muslim Africa and the Middle East, and created new

7 Polman1997.

8 Mignolo 2001.

ones toward South Central Asia.9 Especially these Muslim networks can have direct consequences for those using them, in enhancing their chances on the expanding labour markets of the Arabian Peninsula and South East Asia.

African labour migration has been sufficiently studied to be taken for granted here as a given. It should be stressed however that there are important differences between African and Western labour migration with regard to the structures that inform, shape and finance them. As noted above, Western labour migration is capital intensive and company driven and financed. Overstated: Westerners only travel abroad for a limited period to do a job they have within the company they work for and their travels are paid for by that company. True, a minority of Eastern Europeans perform migrations akin to those described below for Africans. The majority of Eastern Europeans travel for restricted periods to Western countries to perform seasonal jobs. Their expenses are often partly paid for by a hiring company or interim organisation, which has mediated their job before departure. African labour migration is even more capital intensive if one looks at relative budgets and costs, but where in Western labour migration capital is seen as production cost, in African migration it is an investment by a social network and it is employment driven. Overstated: Africans migrate for unknown periods of time to look for jobs they do not yet have. The setting of their migration and travels is not that of a company, but of a primary network: ethnic belonging as is the case for the Sarakole network providing labour to the Parisian sanitation industry: or religion based organisations such as the Senegalese *Mouridiyya* brotherhood.

It is characteristic of Western cultures since the 20th century to live in nuclear families. As has been sketched above, ties of solidarity with the extended family or neighbourhood have been weakened, while the elite practice of sending children to boarding schools has generally been ceased. The primacy of the nuclear family has only been mitigated since the second half of the 20th century by increasing divorce rates, which means many Westerners have been raised in successive recombinant nuclear families, which, in general, one leaves to live by oneself for a period of time before starting one's own nuclear family. Westerners are not used to leaving home to move and change networks, and, like all human beings, experience stress in doing so. Africans, on the contrary, have more experience with living in larger families and in changing environments and being separated from one's loved ones from a young age. The practice of having children raised by parents in other places is widespread. In Chad and other parts of the Sahel, it is common to send children en route with an itinerant Marabout as part of one's education.10 More common even is it for advanced students in Islam to move from city to city, from teacher to teacher to perfect one's knowledge. Compared to Westerners, Africans seem to have more experience in changing primary networks and social settings from a young age. This seems to me a possible cultural advantage in a globalising world. But being used to *changing* networks is not the same as altogether *leaving* networks. African sedentary cultures are characterized

9 Lecocq & Schrijver 2007.

10 de Bruijn (Forthcoming).

by a strong communal sense. Debates on the perception of the body and the individual and on identity and transactional relations (gift giving) in Africa and elsewhere have focussed on the relative absence of individualism in cultures impregnated with notions of dividuality and communality.11

All forms of cosmopolitan movement, Western or African, have one element in common. They involve movement towards the topographical and social extremes of one's world. That is: if we visualize a social network as a web spread in space, global or cosmopolitan mobility means leaving the centre position of one's social network to move to the periphery, where the network is thin, and dependency unequally balanced between those who move and those who are already there. Another common element is solitude.

What sets the cosmopolitan apart from other travellers is the need to deal with the culturally and socially unknown, with alterity as defined by Simmel, in order to not just survive in one's new environment, but to enlarge one's network and to enhance one's social, cultural and economic success.12 Successful cosmopolitans are those who are able to acquaint themselves with the other, who 'cross over'. This crossing over, as all anthropologists know, entails uncertainty, dependency and loneliness. Moving away from the known world causes stress and unease in every human being as we are principally set on a status quo. Human beings do not like to be unsettled.

It is exactly these experiences and the way one deals with them that are decisive in successful adaptation to the new surroundings and cosmopolitan success. To put it bluntly, Africans are far less exposed to loneliness and the retreat on the individual than Westerners, and as globalisation entails individualisation and loneliness, Africans are disadvantaged. Globalisation and cosmopolitism are essentially and practically urban phenomena. Most agricultural communities are effected by economic globalisation, which they might resist or endorse, but very few are consciously cosmopolitan. Location can be irrelevant in global and cosmopolitan networks and lifestyles. The cosmopolitan element in a location is not situated in locus, but in divergence. It is the urban lifestyle that is significant for the global experience. Particular discourses, such as prestige gained from travelling far and often, or acquiring new consumer goods, can easily be qualified as cosmopolitan discourses. Examples of these are the 1980s Zairian *SAPE* culture, centred on travel and designer dress, the Tuareg *Ishumar* culture of the same period centring on travel and music, or the Cameroonian *Feymen* of the 1990s and 2000s, centring on urban cultures of (millenial) capitalism.[13]

Here my paper peters out for the moment, as it still needs expanding, based on your remarks but, by way of conclusion, I think I can safely can state that the trend toward individualisation in the Western world in the second half of the twentieth century has severely reduced and transformed the primary networks of the individual, and the extent to which she or he can depend on what is left of it. In practice, only tourism and the corporate environment remain. The nature of tourism or corporate

11 Piot1999; Strathern 1988.

12 Simmel 1968/1905.

13 Lecocq 2010; Ndjio 2008; Thomas 2003.

mobility, its portals and the financial security involved, largely restrain true cosmopolitan exchange. Africans, on the contrary have seen their primary networks expand and adapted to be of social economic use in their global mobility. African global mobility is less capital intensive and, in case of economic mobility, does not only depend on existing primary networks, but also on positive interaction with local populations. In that sense, African global movement is truly cosmopolitan. However, the process of economic globalisation is largely dictated by the Western world, hence adaptation needs to involve a certain measure of adaptation to Western cultures and lifestyles, which are only mitigated by cosmopolitan social and cultural exchange. This global cosmopolitan existence is largely set in urban surroundings. Hence adaptation to the urban world is crucial to success in the global world.

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