If we are *flâneurs*, can we be cosmopolitans?

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Abstract

Walter Benjamin's and Charles Baudelaire's personage of the *flâneur* can be interpreted as a representation of the ambivalent attraction to the strange and unknown in the experience of anonymous city life, so characteristic for the modern age. To what extent can we interpret this role of the *flâneur* – given its essential qualities in these writings – as a representation of world citizenship? The thesis is that the *flâneur* is more a cosmopolitan in the cultural than in the moral sense of the term. To live up to the demanding moral ideal of world citizenship, the *flâneur* needs to change: from detached observation to more meaningful forms of inter-cultural engagement. Hence the *flâneur* offers some clues for the kind of ethos that is required for a cosmopolitan subjectivity as well as for how it falls short.

摘要

本雅明和波德莱尔笔下的"游荡者"形象可诠释为刻画了在无名的城市生活体验中，陌生事物和未知事物的模糊吸引力，这一点是现代社会的典型特征。鉴于两位作者笔下"游荡者"的核心品质，我们在多大程度上可把这一"游荡者"形象诠释为对世界公民的刻画？本文的主要论点是"游荡者"更多是在文化意义而非道德意义上代表世界公民的品质。要达乎世界公民的严苛道德理想，"游荡者"需要从超然的观察转变为更有意义的文化间融入模式。因为，"游荡者"形象为世界公民的主体性所需的气质以及其所欠缺之处提供了一些线索。

Introduction

Walter Benjamin and Charles Baudelaire took an eccentric lifestyle of mid-19th century Paris, the typical strolling and observing of individual men on the streets of the city, as a heuristic device to write about a change in the modern way of life. Their notion of the *flâneur* basically refers to (or is the personification of) a broad cultural change from the patient engagement with some object or structure of meaning to a restless

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wandering, a distracted perceptive style and way of life. Characteristic for *flânerie* is a certain fleetingness and dispersed attention.

The modern city is the *flâneur*'s habitat; in fact the *flâneur* embodies the city both as a centre of modernity and as a site of encounter with the socially strange and unfamiliar. It is this interest that drives the *flâneur* out into the urban streets and that gives his or her outlook a distinctive cosmopolitan flavour. One of the questions this raises is to what extent the personage of the *flâneur* can be interpreted not just as an allegory of a typical modern way of life, but as a model or representation of world citizenship as well.

The relevance of this question extends beyond an interest in Benjamin's thought generally or the *flâneur* specifically. For if it is true that we modern urbanites increasingly become *flâneurs*, as Benjamin and Baudelaire (and others) have suggested, what promises or challenges does this hold for the realisation of cosmopolitanism? In short, if we are *flâneurs*, can we be cosmopolitans? The *flâneur* as a personage in the work of Benjamin and Baudelaire is located in the modern city, as these authors themselves were. This is relevant for the topic of world citizenship, for not only is cosmopolitanism etymologically related to the idea of the 'cosmopolis', characterised by intense cultural heterogeneity and cultural interchange, but also the ongoing process of urbanisation entails that modern citizens become more and more citizens of world cities before becoming citizens of the world.

Cosmopolitanism refers to the idea that people are citizens of the world. But this can mean different things (Scheffler, 1999). For the cosmopolitan about justice, world citizenship means that the norms of justice must ultimately be seen as governing the worldwide community of human beings, without principled restrictions of a communitarian or nationalist nature. Cosmopolitanism about culture, however, refers to a love of ethnocultural difference as well as the capacity to flourish by drawing on heterogeneous cultural sources. I refer to the first type of world citizenship as 'moral cosmopolitanism' and to the second type as 'cultural cosmopolitanism'.

I will argue that the characteristics of the *flâneur* best align with cultural cosmopolitanism, rather than moral cosmopolitanism which in many ways is much more demanding. Yet I do believe that an *indirect* relation between *flânerie* and moral cosmopolitanism can be established. To conceive of *flânerie* as a step towards moral cosmopolitanism requires a change in the practice of *flânerie*, namely from detached, uncommitted observation of 'the other' to more meaningful modes of interaction.

Why discuss these matters in terms of an 'allegory' – an extended representation or metaphor? Instead of presenting a set of defining attitudes and capacities as part of a 'theory' or 'doctrine' of cosmopolitan citizenship, presenting an allegory of the modern person and critically discussing it while showing alternative possibilities may well be a productive strategy for imagining the kind of person a citizen of the world would amount to in this day and age. Although a lot has been written – especially in the last three decades – about the demands of global justice, what kind of person a 'cosmopolitan' or a 'citizen of the world' is and what the defining structures of his or her personality are remains underdeveloped (Bayram, 2015).

Finally, the central aim of my argument is not that an uncommitted, casual interest in difference needs to be transformed into full-blown moral world citizenship. My main goal is to explore the *potential* that a new, modern way of life offers in terms of substantial cosmopolitan outlooks, as well as to discuss some of its challenges.

The *flâneur* and transcendence

Benjamin gives us some examples to indicate that the modern person has become

footloose, on the move, going from one thing to the next. The rise of modern journalism is one of those examples. Characteristic of journalism is the temporary focus, the need to rapidly move from one subject to the other, depending on what is 'hot' and 'happening' in politics or in society. He or she is never long in one place: after the interview, after the picture and the news flash, after the column or the one-page commentary, he or she has to go to the next thing, just as the strollers in the Paris passage – the equivalent of the modern department store – move from one shop window to the next (Benjamin, 1999 [1982]: 358, 446; Benjamin, 2006 [1940]: 174, 182).[1] More examples can be given. Modern man is not ideologically tied anymore. In political life, for example, one finds the equivalent of the *flâneur* in the guise of 'the floating voter' who almost every election switches political parties, often, as Gijs van Oenen puts it, 'without really knowing why—perhaps just so as "not to get stuck in one place"' (Van Oenen, 2006). With regard to the sphere of wage labour, people are moving between jobs more easily, and are less inclined to stay loyal to one employer: the phenomenon of 'job hopping' is well known in human resources departments. And not only do people generally change jobs more frequently, but they also tend to change partner more often, making the ideal of a lifelong bond between two intimate partners increasingly rare.

The *flâneur* in the work of Benjamin can be characterised by a set of particular properties that are indicative of this very broad cultural trend. The most typical activity is strolling and loitering, wandering aimlessly through the streets of the modern metropolis. This central characteristic implies that another property, namely observing and looking, is of a rather fleeting, dispersed and transitory nature. The *flâneur* never lingers very long in the proximity of one object or structure of meaning that he or she has been drawn to initially.

Moreover, there is a psychological drive in *flânerie* that really defines the *flâneur* on the pages of the writings of Benjamin and Baudelaire (and others). This essential drive or interest is the fascination for what I will refer to as 'transcendence'. This is a fairly underdetermined notion, hence in need of some clarification. I use the term 'transcendent' as referring to those realities, or aspects of reality, that somewhat escape our consciousness and our means to control and to manipulate. If something is transcendent, 'it' is somewhat beyond our horizon of understanding and influence. Taking the work of Benjamin and also Baudelaire concerning *flânerie* into account, one could say that *flânerie* is driven by the interest in and fascination for socio-cultural transcendence.

This is where the typical attraction of the *flâneur* to the modern city fits in. What is characteristic of modern city life is the inevitability of the encounter with strangers. The city is, in the words of Lyn Lofland (1973), 'a world of strangers'. 'Stranger' here refers very generally to the other as an unknown quantity. While prototypical village life is characterised by face-to-face contact with people one knows, one is familiar with, city-dwellers – despite urban villages, suburbs, counterpublics and ethnic clustering – can never avoid meeting strangers. That is why the social reality of city life can never be fully encompassed with one's consciousness. In the words of Iris Young (1990: 240), 'one cannot "take it in"'. This experience of transcendence is always unstable, to the extent that the positive experience of meaning and enchantment can suddenly reveal a disquieting or even disturbing side that threatens to replace the initial positive response (Van Leeuwen, 2008).

The *flâneur* does not try to hide from these more ambiguous aspects of the experience of strangeness and unfamiliarity. Benjamin refers to what he calls the 'maxim of the *flâneur*' in his *Arcades Project*. It is one of the many quotations in this book that

can be characterised to a large degree as a card-index box: 'In our standardized and uniform world, it is right here, deep below the surface, that we must go. Estrangement and surprise, the most thrilling exoticism, are all close by' (Halévy in Benjamin, 1999 [1982]: 444). Apparently, the basic rule (or 'maxim') of *flânerie* is to be aware of the holes in the normal, routine fabric of our daily lives and of the mysteries that they reveal. It is 'deep below the surface' that we must go. The ambiguity of this experience is delicately referred to by the promise that it is not just 'surprise' and 'thrilling exoticism' that we will find, but also 'estrangement'.

Benjamin at one point draws an, often ignored, distinction between an authentic and an inauthentic or derailed version of *flânerie*. The version he unequivocally rejects is the objectifying *flâneur* of the 'physiologies'. Physiologies, a popular literary genre at the time, were artistic exemplifications of physiognomic types, studies of 'the physiognomic appearance of people in order to discover their nationality and social station, character and destiny, from a perusal of their gait, build, and play of features' (Benjamin, 1999 [1982]: 430). They are seen by Benjamin as vulgar, stereotypical and above all as bourgeois; for what they try to do is to dispel the unease of the city-dweller, facing the overwhelming urban environment, by constructing a phantasmagoric vision of familiar types and thus rendering the rich urban environment harmless (Benjamin, 1999 [1982]: 447; Benjamin, 2006 [1938]: 66 ff; Jennings, 2006: 13–14).

So the genre of the 'physiologies' is rejected by Benjamin because, as Martina Lauster (2007: 148) puts it, 'it numbs the authentically experienced anxieties of readers in an increasingly threatening urban environment'. She takes issue with Benjamin, however, by arguing that this rejection is based on an elitist and 'selective reading process favouring negativity' that wrongly

ignores their 'cognitive value for a concept of modernity' (Lauster, 2007: 149–150). But Benjamin's point is not that this genre cannot teach us anything about modernity: on the contrary, what it shows is the modern temptation to reduce the complex, hybrid, opaque reality of expanding metropolitan centres to a limited number of predictable stereotypes.

Benjamin argues that this genre conceals the 'true motives of the *flâneur*', namely to be devoted to the city as labyrinth, as a place to get lost (Benjamin, 1997 [1970]: 293, 298–299; Benjamin, 1999 [1982]: 429–430). This inauthentic *flâneur* is also associated with a critique of some of the effects of the rise of capitalism, particularly a devaluation or degradation of things through the tendency to conceive of value in terms of the price only. This levelling out of significance in terms of exchange value is characteristic of a kind of objectification that is at odds with the authentic *flâneur*'s interest in the particular, the unexpected, the unpredictable newness of things. Benjamin at this point starts referring to Charles Baudelaire (Benjamin, 1999 [1982]: 22).

The *flâneur* as cultural cosmopolitan

The *flâneur* is fascinated by socio-cultural strangeness. This fascination could lead to adventurous travelling to distant and unknown territorial cultures (Hahn, 2012) but it could also lead to an open, crowded, diverse, modern metropolis like Paris. In the work of Baudelaire one finds very explicit interpretations of *flânerie* in terms of an interest in the culturally foreign and unknown. Here we move closer to the idea of cultural cosmopolitanism as a central aspect of *flânerie*:

> For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in

the heart of multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home: to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world—such are a few of the slightest pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define. (Baudelaire, 1995 [1863]: 9)

As Baudelaire immediately makes clear, this passion to 'see the world, to be at the centre of the world' draws the *flâneur* to the big city: 'He marvels at the eternal beauty and the amazing harmony of life in the capital cities, a harmony so providentially maintained amid the turmoil of human freedom' (Baudelaire, 1995 [1863]: 10). The experience of distant vistas takes place through the perception of the exotic elements of metropolitan life. To that effect, the *flâneur* is hard to reconcile with Georg Simmel's portrait of the blasé urbanite who mentally and socially adapts to psychic and social overstimulation by filtering input, by social reserve and indifference (Simmel, 1969 [1903]). Instead, the *flâneur* moves in the urban crowd as into an 'immense reservoir of electrical energy', taking pleasure in the diversity of stimuli of the urban environment (Baudelaire, 1995 [1863]: 10). This 'man of the world, man of the crowd, and child', as Baudelaire refers to him, this 'spiritual citizen of the universe', takes an interest in everything the world over: 'he wants to know, understand, and appreciate everything that happens on the surface of our globe'. He is defined by wonder and a child-like curiosity (Baudelaire, 1995 [1863]: 5, 7).

Benjamin's connections between *flânerie* and cosmopolitanism, though present in his work, are more indirect; that is, through an interest in the strange and unknown, the unsettling mystery that things and people represent in the modern metropolis. The uncanny nature of this exposure is what drives the temptation to categorise and objectify, what we have discussed as inauthentic *flânerie*. Yet what the true *flâneur* does is open up to the fact that most individuals in the city streets are strangers and typically remain so (Benjamin, 2006 [1938]: 71). This sense of mystery is not just unsettling or frightening, for there is also an intoxicating magic or even eroticism present in this fleeting contact with 'otherness', taken in a very broad sense of the term (Benjamin, 2006 [1938]: 77; Benjamin, 2006 [1940]: 185). As Iris Young puts it, 'City life also instantiates difference as the erotic, in the wide sense of an attraction to the other, the pleasure and excitement of being drawn out of one's secure routine to encounter the novel, strange, and surprising' (Young, 1990: 239).

These fleeting, dreamlike contacts with otherness while wandering through the urban landscape are, according to Benjamin, of a very different kind to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's notion of contemplation in his *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (Rousseau, 2011 [1782]). 'What is decisive is that Rousseau already—in his idleness—is enjoying himself, but has not yet accomplished the turning outward' (Benjamin, 1999 [1982]: 453). This suggests that the *flâneur*, in contrast to Rousseau's 'solitary walker', is not in search of his or her true, deep inner nature and is not focused on expressing this inner personality as authentically as possible. Instead, he or she is turned towards the outside world and exploits the playful, urban public sphere that is characterised by Richard Sennett as a *theatrum mundi*, a worldly theatre in which the wearing of masks and the playing of public roles is essential (Sennett, 1974: 34 ff.).

In many cities the awareness of mystery is reinforced by the parallel universe of the underground, the permanently dark underworld where metros, in Benjamin's words, hurtle through tunnels like 'dozens of blind, raging bulls', transporting you through neighbourhoods that appear worlds apart (Benjamin, 1999 [1982]: 84). The city dweller

is constantly aware that reality can never be fully grasped, that there are other worlds, both underground and aboveground. Strolling through the modern, complex metropolis is perceived by Benjamin (1999 [1982]: 880) as a way to contact other worlds based on dreams, one of which is the Paris Passage. These modern city caves (Benjamin, 1999 [1982]: 874) are, in a way, a metaphor for being drawn into a different universe, a kind of mythical underworld (Benjamin, 1999 [1982]: 875). These threshold places are described as magical places, a magic that was threatened when gas and electric lightning where subsequently introduced, killing the sense of sublime radiation from the soft glow of the oil lamp (Benjamin, 1999 [1982]: 564, 567, 570; Benjamin, 2006 [1938]: 81–82). The bright light of electricity is referred to as a 'penetrating new enemy' that extinguished the 'irreproachable glow' that 'wrought a black magic at entranceways' (Benjamin, 1999 [1982]: 567, 564).

A more direct clue of the *flâneur*'s cosmopolitan outlook is Benjamin's ironic comment to the suggestion by a journalist of his day that we should not just be *flâneurs*, but 'patriotic *flâneurs*'. Benjamin comments as follows: 'an early specimen of that dislocation of word and meaning which belongs among the devices of journalism' (Benjamin, 1999 [1982]: 448). Apparently, the idea that the *flâneur* is preoccupied with patriotic, and thus limited, identifications seems an oxymoron to him.

Does this entail that the *flâneur* is completely detached from the local, and constitutes in that sense a representation of a problematic kind of dislocation and alienation? The idea of world citizenship as a kind of uprootedness has been challenged by theorists such as Kwame Anthony Appiah, who argue for a 'rooted cosmopolitanism' and hence the possibility of being indeed a 'cosmopolitan patriot' (Appiah, 1997). This is someone who is both located in a web of attachments to the culture of a particular political entity as well as being committed to cosmopolitan ideals, and where this sense of belonging is not an obstacle but a vital existential condition to openness towards difference. However, other parts of Benjamin's work allow for a more 'rooted' interpretation of *flânerie*, particularly where Benjamin describes the streets of the city from the point of view of *flânerie* in terms of a 'domestic interior' (Benjamin, 1999 [1982]: 422), a 'furnished and familiar interior' (referring to the arcades; Benjamin, 1999 [1982]: 423), a 'room' (Benjamin, 1999 [1982]: 10, 895) where the *flâneur* feels at home (Benjamin, 1999 [1982]: 423). To put it in Baudelaire's (1995 [1863]: 9) words: 'To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home'. It is a qualified belonging though, for if it turns into a literal longing for urban intimacy, for thick patterns of solidarity, for an escape from anonymity towards warm face-to-face community, the condition for cosmopolitanism will easily be undermined.

We may conclude that the *flâneur* can be interpreted as standing for, representing, a cultural cosmopolitan if we take this to be, in the words of Samuel Scheffler, someone who enjoys 'drawing in idiosyncratic ways on culturally eclectic materials' (Scheffler, 1999: 261, 257). *Flânerie* embodies a stance of openness towards divergent cultural expressions, a search for contrasts rather than uniformity (cf. Hannerz, 1990: 239). And if we take an allegory to be 'a mode of representation in which each element of what is said or depicted stands for something else' (Gilloch, 1997: 135), then it is safe to claim that the *flâneur* can be read as an allegory of cultural cosmopolitanism.

Flânerie versus moral cosmopolitanism

The question I want to address now is to what extent *flânerie* can be seen as an

allegory of a more demanding world citizenship, namely *moral* cosmopolitanism. I believe there is no straightforward or easy relationship between *flânerie* as an allegory of modern identity and being engaged in the process of realising 'justice beyond borders', roughly the idea that civil, political and social rights are truly *human* rights and should be established and protected equally on a global scale (Caney, 2005).

The first obstacle in this regard is that the *flâneur* as allegory tends to be gendered, classed and raced. The *flâneur* is typically an aristocratic white male with lots of leisure time. The methodological question this raises is whether it is possible to interpret the *flâneur* as a 'position' or 'role' that, in principle, can be occupied by anyone – male or female, urban or provincial, black or white. This is a general obstacle to the allegorical approach, but especially so for the attempt to interpret the *flâneur* as a personification of *moral* cosmopolitanism based on universal respect and equality.

Let us concentrate for a moment on the gendered nature of the *flâneur*. Janet Wolff and others have criticised the invisibility of women in the writings of Baudelaire, Simmel and Benjamin. According to Wolff, the 'oversocialisation' of the public sphere in these writings, with its associated consciousness, and the equation of this sphere with the process of modernisation tends to render women invisible. This approach ignores the private realm, which was women's primary domain in that period. Hence the title of her article: 'The invisible *flâneuse*' (Wolff, 1985).

Yet Elizabeth Wilson argues that in the mid-19th century women in Paris were less passive and 'locked up' than Wolff suggests,[2] and more importantly, that the *flâneur* cannot be read as a historical, descriptive account of the city, but should be seen first and foremost as 'a mythological or allegorical figure who represented what was perhaps the most characteristic response of all to the wholly new forms of life that seemed to be developing: ambivalence' (Wilson, 1992: 93). She argues that, in many respects, 'there could never be a female *flâneur*, for this reason: that the *flâneur* himself never really existed' (Wilson, 1992: 109; Lauster, 2007: 146). Instead of a historical reality, the *flâneur* should be seen, as Rob Shields puts it, as a 'mythological ideal-type, found more in discourse than in everyday life' (Shields, 1994: 67). In that case, the notion is not inherently or inevitably restricted in terms of gender, race or class. To be sure, the *flâneur* in this article should not be interpreted as a figure of either-or exclusions (masculine or feminine, rich or poor, white or black), but as a representation of the ambivalent attraction to the strange and unknown in the experience of anonymous city life, so characteristic of the modern age (D'Souza and McDonough, 2006b).

Now although we have cleared this first hurdle, there is a second obstacle in the attempt to extend the role of the *flâneur* to that of a moral cosmopolitan. For *flânerie*, as we have said, involves fleeting and dispersed attention; the *flâneur* is strolling, wandering aimlessly, never long in one place, constantly drawn to new and unknown vistas. The consequence is that he or she 'treats the objects of the city with a somewhat detached attitude (an attitude which is a short step away from isolation and alienation …)' (Tester, 1994: 6). In fact, the *flâneur* is not primarily concerned with the basic needs or rights of his fellow people when he is wandering through the streets of the modern diverse city, but instead is fascinated by the different manifestations of humanity.[3] Indeed, the *flâneur* is essentially preoccupied with the practice of observing, with the role of passive spectator. As Rob Shields puts it regarding Benjamin's and Baudelaire's version of the *flâneur*: 'Observation is the *raison d'être* of the *flâneur*, and seeing visual lures

is the key to the *flâneur*'s movement, drawn from sight to sight' (Shields, 1994: 65; cf. Tester, 1994: 14). What is at stake is sheer observation, passive registration, without an attempt to work towards some kind of – even fractured – meaningful contact.

This kind of aesthetic social distance seems hard to reconcile with moral cosmopolitanism. It is, for instance, hard to see how such an ethos could be seen as a model or representation of a minimal practical engagement with particular peoples in oppressive undemocratic regimes, or with a more egalitarian distribution of the world's economic wealth and natural resources. Such practical engagement, even for a moderate moral cosmopolitanism, requires a concentrated and lasting effort. One needs minimally to be somehow part of, or actively contributing to, the process of developing institutions, policies and habits that would make the stable implementation of cosmopolitan principles possible. This is likely to require, in the words of Scheffler (1999: 269), 'considerable social imagination and ingenuity, psychological sophistication and sensitivity, and political determination and skill'.

If we think of the *flâneur*-as-cosmopolitan, this type of demanding world citizenship seems inapposite and out of reach. What drives the *flâneur* are not moral concerns, but aesthetic ones. Furthermore, the movement towards the strange and hidden aspects of city life is idiosyncratic, very individualised. It is a 'sociability of "Ones"', as Shields (1994: 63) puts it, 'which emphasizes and preserves the separateness of the individual'. This leads him to qualify *flânerie* negatively from the moral point of view: 'The danger of excessive and thus anomic individualism which bypasses social norms in favour of idiosyncratic behaviour … makes the *flâneur* a potentially treacherous friend and a dysfunctional social element who provokes the need for discipline' (Shields, 1994: 71). This

evaluation leads Shields to conclude that *flânerie* basically is an 'unethical practice … the embodiment of alienation' (Shields, 1994: 77).

Samuel Scheffler affirms this ambiguous moral status of the 'cultural cosmopolitan'. A lifestyle that is organised around cultural eclecticism and wandering aimlessly through different cultural and social entities might lack the infrastructure of responsibility that normally is part of living within a certain, relatively stable community. The moving about, crossing communal lines and identifications, could lead to 'moral isolation', that is 'being cut off from the forms of social support that support and structure and sustain individual responsibility' (Scheffler, 1999: 271).

Should we conclude from this that *flânerie*, the typical modern practice of wandering and being drawn to exotic places and hidden cultural meanings, basically is an immoral activity? Is the logical consequence that moral cosmopolitanism is excluded from the point of view of such *flânerie*? I want to resist a straightforward confirmation of these questions. First of all, the arguments of Scheffler and Shields concerning the morally dubious status of the cultural cosmopolitan or the *flâneur* are based on an extreme version of it. In general terms, I want to resist the following false opposition: either immerse oneself in a community with a functioning 'infrastructure of responsibility', or become morally alienated. As I have argued, the *flâneur* as an allegorical figure can be conceived of as feeling at home in the city and cannot simply be portrayed as being 'alienated' in that sense. The practice of *flânerie* requires a sense of urban belonging, although that type of urban belonging is very different from the thick solidarity that characterises typical village life.

Second, I want to argue that cultural cosmopolitanism or *flânerie* and moral cosmopolitanism cannot simply be conceived of as

opposite and unbridgeable versions of world citizenship. Too often enthrallment with difference is simply seen as cultural dilettantism that, as some put it, 'fails to provide us with the moral resources necessary for combating injustice' (Merry and De Ruyter, 2011: 4). What is overlooked here is that an underlying relationship exists between an existential interest in socio-cultural difference on the one hand and developing a more encompassing moral sense and commitment on the other.

From *flânerie* to moral cosmopolitanism

Although Martha Nussbaum and Kwame Anthony Appiah write in a very different prose and tradition than the continental literature on the *flâneur*, they are both relevant to our question concerning the moral status of *flânerie*. A conceptual connection between *cultural* cosmopolitanism and *moral* cosmopolitanism can be found in their classic texts on world citizenship.

According to Nussbaum, part of the ability to see oneself as a member of both local communities and humanity itself is the insight or realisation that the traditions and habits of one's familiar cultural framework are not self-evident, natural or necessary. Such a sense of cultural contingency can only be achieved by a kind of suspension of common sense. This awareness of other cultural possibilities is mediated by 'cross-cultural inquiry' that contrasts the culturally familiar with alternative ways of life (Nussbaum, 1997: 55). It is the contact with, and openness to, the culturally different that broadens our horizons to include the formerly strange in a wider, more inclusive understanding and moral sense. According to Nussbaum (1997: 93 ff.), reading literature and studying different histories are routes towards achieving this wider sense of the moral community.

Narrative art, as Nussbaum (1997: 88) puts it 'has the power to make us see the lives of the different with more than a casual tourist's interest'. Storytelling shows us how circumstances shape the lives of people, their possibilities for action as well as their desires, hopes and fears. This makes people capable of compassion. In addition to this 'narrative imagination' (Nussbaum, 1997: Ch. 3), sufficient cross-cultural knowledge of a more general kind is also important for cultivating humanity (Nussbaum, 1997: Ch. 2). A widening of narrow sympathies can only take place by becoming acquainted with some fundamentals about the histories and cultures of many different groups. Hence Nussbaum's argument in favour of the study of non-Western cultures and religions in liberal education today. That this cosmopolitan education should be based on substantial engagement with otherness becomes very clear where Nussbaum rejects the 'absurdly misguided' idea that we should aim at 'an equal knowledge of all histories and cultures', which she compares to the desire for 'a bit of knowledge of all languages'. This ideal, reminding us of *flânerie*, 'would produce a ridiculously superficial result' (Nussbaum, 1997: 68).

In the case of Appiah, the connection referred to earlier is even more clearly present. Universal moral involvement is only available *through* real contacts and particular affinities. Let me quote Appiah in this regard:

> I want … to resist the sharp distinction that is sometimes made between 'moral' and 'cultural' cosmopolitanism, where the former comprises those principles of moral universalism and impartialism, and the latter comprises the values of the world traveller, who takes pleasure in conversation with exotic strangers. The discourse of cosmopolitanism will add to our understanding only when it is informed by both of these ideals: if we care *about* others who are not part of our political order—others

who may have commitments and beliefs that are unlike our own—we must have a way to talk *to* them. (Appiah, 2005: 222)

Hence this cosmopolitanism has to engage with difference and it is only by doing so that the moral value of human life in a more universal sense becomes apparent.

The moral obligations of world citizenship remain abstract and noncommittal if there is no supporting intercultural dialogue or if there are no other means to learn about unfamiliar ways of life (Appiah, 2005: 253). Nobody really cares about people as abstract entities. As Richard Rorty once said in this regard: 'the word "humanity" leaves me cold' (Rorty, 2001: 174).[4] Hence Appiah rightly stresses the role of a conversation across boundaries of identity, where the notion 'conversation' is unusually broad, encompassing both literal talk and engagement with the experience and ideas of others through novels, movies, works of art (Appiah, 2006: 85). This is crucial not only to learn about the differences, but also about cross-cultural sameness (Appiah, 2005: 254).

Appiah is clearly in favour of rooted cosmopolitanism, as we have said, but Nussbaum argues for a more stringent moral universalism and is in some ways closer to the problematic kind of detached cosmopolitanism we have rejected earlier. Whereas Nussbaum argues that local attachments like nationality are 'morally irrelevant' and that our 'first allegiance' is to humanity itself (Nussbaum, 2002: 5), Appiah defends the position that our own state or city constitutes 'appropriate spheres of moral concern' and that a degree of moral particularism regarding these smaller scales is justified (Appiah, 1997: 623–624; Appiah, 2006: Ch. 10).

An intriguing way to conceive of rooted cosmopolitanism, and to soften the opposition between 'community' and 'humanity', is to think of the modern city as a *local* human

settlement that urbanites are attached to and through which *global* connections become available. The metropolis as the modern man's habitat offers the possibility of local socio-cultural attachments to expand towards the unfamiliar and distant. The urban frame is where both types of cosmopolitanism can grow, given the conceptual connection between the two. After all, it is the cultural variant of cosmopolitanism that is supported by modern city life, with its inherent diversity of cultures and ethnicities (Anderson, 2011; Binnie et al., 2006; Sandercock, 1998). If there is an underlying link between the two types of cosmopolitan citizenship, the city could potentially be a strategic site for the efforts to achieve more global justice. In other words, if city life has the potential to cultivate cultural cosmopolitanism, the lifestyle of *flânerie*, it could also offer an incentive for 'thinking and feeling beyond the nation' (Cheah and Robbins, 1998). The city could be a possible mediator between local loyalties and global identification because the city itself offers encounters with the global sphere via everyday urban experiences – what Dürrschmidt (1997: 57) has called 'microglobalization'. One is connected to an international public *via* one's belonging to the world city that, in a way, offers virtual corridors to distant places. Cities, as Ulf Hannerz says, 'open towards the world' for the reason that 'there is a flow of people and goods as well as meanings in and out of the city; to and from other cities and more distant areas' (Hannerz, 1992: 197–198; Hannerz, 1996: 127ff.). This means, in the words of Benjamin (1999 [1982]: 419), that, 'in the course of *flânerie*, far-off times and places interpenetrate the landscape of the present moment'.

It is this interpenetration of cultures that makes a relationship between *flânerie* and moral cosmopolitanism possible; however, not in any linear, causal way. The modern city dweller as *flâneur*, in order to become a

cosmopolitan in the moral sense, needs to go beyond transcendence fetishism to establish some kind of subject-subject relationship. It is not the sheer observation of otherness, the sterile fascination with difference and the unknown that will enhance the sense of human vulnerability and global responsibility.

The required cross-cultural and cross-national involvement could evolve from face-to-face encounters in prosaic urban spaces, that is, encounters with ethnocultural, religious or national others. Such encounters have the potential to stimulate 'broader spatial imaginaries' that are 'embedded in everyday urban action' (Routledge and Cumbers in Leontidou, 2010: 1186). Here we should think not so much of the shared public spaces of the modern metropolis like the squares, streets, city parks, public transportation and markets where the *flâneur* seems most at home. Although such shared public spaces do allow for certain types of interaction (Middleton, 2016), these interactions are typically superficial and fleeting rather than engaging and potentially more durable. As Ash Amin (2002) puts it, the open public space of modern cities is a place of transit rather than of meaningful contact. In fact, the 'body management' (Lofland, 1973: 140) of the city dweller in public is often geared towards the creation of a 'symbolic shield of privacy', the point of which is 'to make very clear that one is not open for interaction' (Lofland, 1973: 146–147).

Instead, the kind of space that has the most potential to cultivate the wider moral sense that world citizenship entails is what Ash Amin (2002: 969) refers to as a 'micro-public'.[5] Micro-publics are spaces of association, with a limited entry for the general public, in which dialogue, debate and prosaic negotiations are compulsory; examples of these include the workplace, schools, colleges, sports clubs, neighbourhood houses and youth centres. Such micro-publics within city spaces could be seedbeds for cosmopolitan citizenship, particularly in diverse urban environments. To locate such institutions at the edges of established communities could be one practical strategy to facilitate the desired opportunity for meeting people of different ethnic, cultural and economic backgrounds – what Sennett refers to as 'active-edge planning' (Sennett, 1995, 2011).

The goal of such intercultural engagement is not a kind of 'de-stranging of strangers', a domestication of the other by interrogating him or her in order to establish contact in the rural, personal mode (Bauman, 2003: 6–8). What is important in this regard is to resist the myth that the ethnocultural other can at some point become completely transparent. Resisting this myth means that the sense of transcendence, of relative opacity can still be present. In fact, it is this sense of finitude that keeps the intercultural conversation going and meaningful, or *any* conversation for that matter.

Cosmopolitanism is more a sentiment than an ideology (Appiah, 1997: 619). Still, to cultivate, through intercultural contact, a wider moral sensibility is only a first step towards being a citizen of the world. Besides this widening of the moral horizon – encompassing different cultural, ethnic and national categories – it requires practical engagement also emanating from this sensibility. It is not enough just to perceive 'the other' as an integral part of a common humanity.

What could this new, moral role look like in practice? Lila Leontidou (2006, 2010) has dubbed recent urban social movements as '*flâneur* activists' for the reason that these activists move from city to city to protest against injustices of neoliberal globalisation and operate in loose, overlapping networks rather than in totalities. She is referring here to the rise of transnational urban movements that converge in rallies against unfair trade and undemocratic globalisation, which have escalated since the massive demonstrations

against the World Trade Organisation summit in Seattle in 1999.

These urban movements consist of very mobile citizens who can afford to travel to protests in cities across the globe and at the same time are rooted in local urban conditions and concerns. That is why she refers to this new transnational activist as a 'rooted cosmopolitan', that is, a 'hybrid subject bridging the gap between local and global' (Leontidou, 2010: 1186). The *flâneur* activist fights for the 'right to the city' by exercising his or her rights of participation and appropriation (or even occupation) against the global forces of the free market ideology. This is just one telling example of the way modern mobile urbanites can be involved in issues of global justice and thus a cosmopolitanism of the *moral* kind.

Modern identity and world citizenship: Opportunities and challenges

It would be presumptuous to claim that real-world cosmopolitan engagement is *exclusively* indebted to the casual interest in urban diversity that is characteristic of *flânerie*. Most likely, there is more than one route to such cosmopolitan engagement (Hannerz, 2006). However, two of the most prominent features of the *flâneur*, namely being an urban dweller and being drawn to socio-cultural transcendence, can be firmly located on the side of cosmopolitan attitudes and practices, not just on the conceptual but also on the empirical level.

Firstly, empirical research has established a strong link between the size of a town one resides in and increasing feelings of tolerance of difference (Huggins and Debies-Carl, 2014). Big cities are not only generators of wealth and power, but also of progressive moral attitudes and practices (Wilson, 1985). The immense diversity of most large cities offers many opportunities for interethnic

and intercultural understanding. This is not only the case historically, given the role of trading cities in the cultivation of cosmopolitanism (Driessen, 2005), but also currently, as global cities tend to be more diverse, tolerant and cosmopolitan than smaller ones and than rural areas across several dimensions, such as: voting behaviour (more liberal), dealing with sexual minorities (less homophobic) and the cultivation of numerous cosmopolitan skills (reconsidering one's own opinions, understanding the perspectives of others, looking past initial dislikes, accepting dissenting ideas) (Warf, 2015). Or to put it the other way around, negative attitudes from majorities towards minorities are more frequent in the countryside than in cities. As the authors of a report on the European Union conclude, 'All dimensions of exclusionism were favored more strongly in the countryside than in cities' (Coenders et al., 2005: vi). As a consequence, instead of being domesticated, otherness and uncommonness in the city have a real chance of growing into a critical mass.

Secondly, if we take a closer look at the empirical evidence of the kind of values that constitute a cosmopolitan allegiance, we find that a cosmopolitan identification with a commitment to the well-being of all human beings in the world positively relates to cherishing diversity, openness and multiculturalism (Bayram, 2015; Rathbun et al., 2016). Furthermore, people who cherish such values are much more likely to support concrete measures of cosmopolitan politics like foreign development assistance to developing countries (Bayram, 2016). Or again, the other way around, the more likely a person is to value conformity and order, the less likely it is that cosmopolitan allegiance is present and the less likely that support for such politics is present.

Hence, being drawn to the unknown and unpredictable in the city-scape is not antithetical to moral cosmopolitanism and the

kinds of actions and practices that express such a progressive outlook. An urbanite who is drawn to the outside of what is familiar and conventional, to what escapes an immediate understanding and common sense, is more likely to support emancipatory politics and to cultivate trans-national allegiances. So, to the extent that we have become *flâneurs*, these core features – city dwelling and enjoying cultural diversity – offer opportunities for a more inclusive moral sense.

What complicates such progressive tendencies is an anxiety for what escapes a familiar cultural framework. As Benjamin alluded to, the experience of transcendence is unstable and ambiguous: what is strange and unknown can be a source of fascination as well as alienation. *Flânerie* therefore is not for everyone and will not open up to world citizenship in all circumstances. Indeed, the desire to engage in *flânerie* could very well depend on certain social privileges that are unavailable to those who perceive difference, rightly or wrongly, as a vital threat to self-preservation. Unemployment, poor housing, a financially uncertain future – these are all factors that may contribute to the belief among the working classes that the 'other' is partly responsible for their problems and uncertainties (Haylett, 2006; Kim, 2003; Van Leeuwen, 2008). Interaction might not help in such circumstances of (perceived) social competition (Allport, 1954).

Yet there is always the potential of cosmopolitanism in some shape or form given the increasing urbanisation and transgressive tendencies of the modern identity. To envision a better world, a different world than the one we live in, entails a view of something that does not yet exist: it involves both a sense of dissatisfaction with the present world and a sense of wonder and imagination as to how it could be (Delanty, 2009). It involves transcendence in that sense, but also in the sense of transcending the boundaries of a communitarian or nationalist nature, in order to strive for norms and schemes of justice that extent beyond the confines and limits of a familiar group. And all this could start from an eagerness to tap into urban energies and to absorb readily unforeseen novelties (Kramer and Short, 2011)

I do not believe that active world citizenship on justice is a basic moral requirement (Van Leeuwen, 2010). Really becoming a moral cosmopolitan in the practical sense is pretty demanding. However, I do see it as a moral ideal (cf. McKinnon, 2005). And in order to live up to this potential of the modern *flâneur* in the midst of the heterogeneous city, a free-floating love of diversity and strangeness is not going to be sufficient. *Flânerie* as distracted, impressionistic viewing could become like the practice of swiftly changing television channels with the remote control or like surfing and hyper-jumping through virtual worlds: never getting caught up in a story or drama, but just enjoying the shock of anonymous abundance, the diversity of new stimuli, the bombardment of fragments and images removed from their context (Featherstone, 1998). Such 'culture-zapping' is insufficient for establishing some meaningful version of moral cosmopolitan citizenship.

What is needed is a wider moral sense that can develop only on the basis of a more engaging cross-cultural dialogue. In this regard, the modern cosmopolis could be more than just an exciting locus of the surprising and the culturally different: it could also become a rich source of global justice.

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Notes

1. When referring to Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* (1999 [1982]), I am referring to the different materials assembled in Volume 5 of Walter Benjamin's *Gesammelte Schriften* under the title *Das Passagen-Werk* (first published in 1982) that were translated in 1999 and that include, amongst others: 'Paris, capital of the nineteenth century' (both the 1935 and the 1939 version), 'Convolutes' (*Aufzeichnungen und Materialien*), 'Arcades' and 'The arcades of Paris'.
2. See also many contributions in *The Invisible Flâneuse*? (D'Souza and McDonough, 2006a).
3. If one is allowed to interpret Baudelaire's poetry on urban life as part of his oeuvre on *flânerie*, this lifestyle certainly does *not exclude* an interest in the well-being of others on the city streets. See for instance 'The eyes of the poor' and 'Counterfeit' in his *Paris Spleen* (1970 [1869]).
4. Richard Rorty argues that justice should be conceived of as a larger loyalty to groups that people share a form of life with and that expanding such loyalty across borders is a consequence of sentimental identification rather than rational insight (Rorty, 1997, 1998). He thereby takes issue with the Kantian notion inherent in justice theories of thinkers like John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas that justice emanates from a faculty called 'reason' and that it, regardless of context, can be realised by every 'rational' person given enough critical reflection.
5. I take issue with Amin's agonistic interpretation of these publics for the goal of integration (Van Leeuwen, 2015).

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