

## Cosmopolitics and the dialogical self

### A cosmopolítica e o *self* dialógico

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**Abstract:** Cosmopolitics is growing as an alternative to identity battles, a critical form of cosmopolitanism. This contribution claims that such an alternative will only be feasible with individuals as dialogical selves. Ethnographic interviews with Muslims and Christians of different generations yield insights into their notions of personhood. Different notions of person are then checked against the new predicament of cosmopolitics in urban settings. The traditional notion of 'full person' can be distinguished from that of 'partial persons', subjacent to the views of the dialogical self. Educational and social benefits of the 'partial person' concept are outlined. Qualitative research into the perception of the person as a 'partial person' opens the way to an appreciation of the dialogical self approach, especially in the context of an ever more urbanized humanity. Against that background, cosmopolitics is being re-discussed as a possible avenue for a global society.

**Keywords:** cosmopolitics, dialogical self, intercultural learning.

**Resumo:** A cosmopolítica, como uma forma crítica do cosmopolitismo, está crescendo como uma alternativa às lutas identitárias. Trata-se de uma alternativa que só será viável se os indivíduos se entenderem como *selves* dialógicos. As entrevistas etnográficas realizadas com muçulmanos e cristãos, de diferentes gerações, forneceram *insights* sobre suas noções de *personhood*. Verificam-se noções inovadoras de pessoa diante da nova situação da cosmopolítica em ambientes urbanos. A noção tradicional de "pessoa plena" pode ser diferenciada da de "pessoas parciais", subjacente às visões do *self* dialógico. No texto, é delineada a produtividade para os campos educacional e social do uso do conceito de "pessoa parcial". A pesquisa qualitativa sobre a percepção da pessoa como "pessoa parcial" abre possibilidades para uma apreciação da abordagem dialógica do *self*, especialmente no contexto de uma humanidade cada vez mais urbanizada. Em oposição a esse cenário, a cosmopolítica volta a ser discutida como uma possível via para a sociedade global.

**Palavras-chave:** cosmopolítica, *self* dialógico, aprendizagem intercultural.

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### Identity and cosmopolitics

In the literature of psychology, social psychology, sociology and anthropology of the past three decades we have witnessed a great amount of emphasis on identity, identity dynamics and extreme identity claims

(in religious terms, in ethnicity categories or in cultural profiles, apart from nationalist concepts). I will not give an overview here.

It is my conviction that we are only beginning to understand what 'person', 'identity' let alone 'meaning of life' can mean for the different cultural traditions of

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the world. Hence, I cannot in any way make uncritical claims for universality on any of these topics. Rather, I will suggest a hypothetical perspective which is certainly unconventional, but which holds promises for a comparative study of these phenomena. Both as an anthropologist and as a humanistically inspired researcher I deliberately and explicitly choose for a particular conceptual frame.

## Identity

In the words of Stuart Hall (1997) identity can refer to two different, and mutually complementary concepts. Either it designates a state of being, which then can be claimed by a group or community, or it points to a process of identity formation. In the present era (which could be called post-postmodernist, Hermans, 2004), both interpretations can clash: *e.g.* fundamentalists and nationalists seem to stress the unchangability (or even the ‘natural kind’ status) of their identity, while many urbanites today change beliefs or denominational practices with evolutions in their contexts.

The hypothesis I formulate on this issue is that the continuous and worldwide urbanization in the world promotes a bifurcation between a religious or doctrinal rather fixed life stance (‘being’) on the one hand and a series of varying lifestyles (‘process’) on the other hand. The subjects I interviewed all live in the densely urbanized area of Western Europe (Pinxten e Dikomitis, 2006). This entails that they are probably more confronted with technological innovation and impact than groups living in traditional, more isolated contexts (desert or mountain peoples, for example). I take for granted that a majority living in the European space can be characterized by means of the three types of ‘self’ of Hermans (2004), since they were reared in one of the three religions of the book or in the Enlightenment reaction against them. This does not automatically hold for those residents in today’s Europe who come from other places in the world (Asia, Africa, Native America).

## Cosmopolitanism

Cosmopolitanism is very popular in anthropology these days. The term needs to be qualified. The traditional meaning of the notion dates from Ancient Greece, but is better known in the Christian and the Enlightenment version (Kinneking, 2003). Throughout history and right up to the Human Rights version, the term refers to a view developed by western cultural groups about the proper way to be and to organize the world. This view is locally discussed and made public, and then proclaimed as the best way for humankind. In doing so, one in fact attributes

universal validity to a local and culture specific project. In contradistinction with this view the new cosmopolitanism I advocate breaks away from this tradition. Rather, cosmopolitan validity will have to be decided upon in a comparative mentality (Nader, 1994): the world is and remains culturally (and religiously) diverse, and comparative research is the only type of study that can do justice to this situation. Reaching a cosmopolitan perspective on values and world views will involve continuous negotiation and the hypothesis is that it will most probably take the form of a provisional equilibrium of unity in diversity. In recent years the alternative term of ‘cosmopolitics’ has been suggested to capture a double and supposedly antagonistic view on identity. Cosmopolitics acknowledges the need for universal rules and understandings (as in cosmopolitanism), but seeks to integrate it with communitarian positions. In other words, cosmopolitics grants that humankind is one and needs to find common ways or norms to live together, but at the same time it stresses that differences obtain and should be recognized and respected. It can be seen as the modern version of the old ideal of unity in diversity.

## Personhood

Again, in the western tradition I understand that the person is understood basically as an integrated whole, which is built up over time. It is believed that a person is built up through education in the religious and cultural canons of the community. In focusing on the religious or life stance education of a person the ideal seems to be that: (i) the person is gradually more and more ‘filled in’ as he passes through different rites of passage. After birth the Jewish, the Christian and the Islamic community give the newborn a name and have elders take a vow to the god covering for the child (*i.e.*, the institute of godfather and godmother); with puberty the child takes a vow *vis-à-vis* god and thus shows its coming of age as a religiously conscious person. With adulthood marriage and child birth fills in the person even more. (ii) Typical for the Mediterranean tradition is that the person seems to be conceived as a full and exclusive person. That is, there is no room for other aspects of personhood which would fall outside of, let alone be conflicting with the religious mould one has been educated in. Hermans (2004) speaks of the pre-modern self with an encompassing view and educational practice filled in by the doctrine of the religion(s): one becomes a Jew, a Christian or a Muslim over years and the result is a person who is total and sufficient in himself. Cognitive, corporeal and moral categories are all defined by the religious tradition, and there is no room for alternatives. In practice, one is

either a Jew/Christian/Muslim or one is a heathen. The ‘multiple personality’ is firmly held to be an aberration, which is severely condemned (as heresy, blasphemy and the like). If not, it is a psychiatric syndrome (Hermans, 2004) in conflict with the ideal of the fully integrated and ‘consistent’ person. I call this notion of person the 100% version. It is relevant to mention that only recently did anthropologists come to the conclusion that heresy and blasphemy do not obtain in most other religious traditions of the world (Pinxten, 2010), yielding the idea that the 100% version may not be the ideal for these cultures. Also, in the post-postmodern world of the contemporary urbanite a kind of soft multiple self appears to become more popular, called the ‘dialogical self’ by Hermans (2004). It is obvious that postmodernism can hardly be envisioned in a mechanistic world; without doubt the information technology of the past decades has triggered a tremendous opening of perspectives, and without doubt reduced the control by one authority on the development of an integrated self to a large extent. So, although it is difficult to claim that technology produces this or that self, it is undoubtedly so that present informational technology led to the impossibility of classical closed authorities to continue their hold on people’s minds. Instead a flood of information has spread over people, leading to wide centrifugal circles. That some persons feel drowned by such flood and narrow down again to a simple and straightforward, maybe a unique authority is not in contradiction with the former statement. Even then, the ‘new faithful’ will differ in their mindset from their former colleagues: they will be ‘happy few’ rather than majority and they may be driven to be more defensive and hence tougher in attitude than their forerunners. The mere availability of information and alternative views through present-day information technology will be a permanent stress factor for such selves, I claim.

The hypothesis I formulate on this dimension is that the 100% version of personhood which was more tenable in the context of a presumably monocultural context (exclusively Jewish or Christian or Muslim), might best be substituted by the ideal of the ‘partial person’ (50% person) in the present urbanized world, allowing for a ‘dialogical self’ strategy of community building. This would be the third precondition to think the new cosmopolitanism.

## The empirical data

(i) M. Van Hecke who is chief executive of a vast and powerful catholic educational network (governing some 80% of all schools and responsible for the same percentage of pupils in Flanders, Belgium) declared in

an interview and in debates that Muslim children are welcome in the catholic schools, provided they abided with the rule to follow courses in the catholic catechism. On that condition they could be allowed one hour of Islamic teaching as well. She explained that choice or offer by saying that it “is necessary to have your own religious identity first in order to be able to meet another religion”. Since Muslim children do not know enough about Christianity, according to Van Hecke, they should be taught that religion at school as a condition for being allowed in the school.

(ii) When interviewing Muslim adults in Flanders and The Netherlands over the past decade, I was often told that, although I was appreciated as a good person ‘it was a pity you lack the essential dimension of religion. That way you can never be a full human being’.

On one occasion, I advanced the opinion that ecological-economical decisions to be made on a global scale in the next decade or so (the global warning/extinction of resources threats) were hampered by the exclusivist positions of the Mediterranean religions, which strive for universalization of their message instead of searching for an “entente” with people from a variety of religious and cultural backgrounds. The attitude of the Vatican, and some Islamic countries at the Cairo UN conference in 2000 on demographic issues illustrates this point: they tried to prohibit UN decisions because they were perceived as conflicting with their views on humankind (e.g. abortion, the use of condoms, etc.). A self-declared left-wing Muslim leader in the particular debate I was attending said he was offended by my line of arguing and declared, with the right hand on the Koran, that none of my arguments would be necessary ‘provided people would follow the ecological rules which are laid down in this book’. He was unaware of the fact that his answer illustrated precisely the point I was making.

(iii) A third example stems from a ‘green’ politician, posing as a progressive party member of Turkish immigrant origin, who claimed in a meeting she organized on the issue that: ‘it is a Human Right for Muslims to be buried in a cemetery which is properly organized and exclusive for Muslims. It should be separated from other burying grounds by trees, as is specified in the Koran’. That the local city elders did not meet her on this point, because ‘segregation right into the graves has a long, and despicable history in Europe’ (mayor Termont, 2008) and all requirements of Islamic burial were pragmatically met in the rulings of the democratically elected city council, was seen by her as a violation of the rights of Muslims. When I told her that he was in fact asking for a discriminatory measure, she decided not to speak to me anymore.

(iv) A fourth example is drawn from many interviews and conversations with freethinkers in Belgium and The Netherlands. Especially the collapse of the multicultural society in the latter country was followed by a ritualistic murder on filmmaker-journalist Theo Van Gogh (in 2006) and the commotion around the Danish cartoons on Mohammed. Freethinkers from Belgium and The Netherlands were consequently split in two groups: the conservatives increasingly came to rely on a so-called more radical view abiding with French 'laïcité' (e.g. Cliteur, 2007), and the progressive group proposed to look for an updating of old positions in the light of the tremendous diversification of religious traditions in our region. The former group argues for a stricter separation of religion and state, yielding 'passive pluralism' at the most. That is to say, let Catholics be schooled in their religion, separated from Protestants, Muslims, Jews, Freethinkers and so on. Schools and society as such should be 'neutral', going for a universal moral code for all, unhampered by any religions choices (Cliteur, o.c.). The rulings banning the headscarf emanate from this group. The second group of freethinkers claims that 'active pluralism' should be installed, both in schools and in public offices. That is to say, one should educate people and engage in societal initiatives by knowing about and being able to interculturally behave with difference. Interculturality rather than mono- or multiculturalism obtains.

(v) The final example is drawn from systematic interviews with some 200 adolescents (age 21-24) in Flanders<sup>2</sup>, although not one clear picture emerged from this set of interviews, it appears that the adolescents are composing different sorts of mixtures from the varied offer of today. A large majority of them adopt a sort of 'custom Christianity': although less than half of them believe in the existence of a god with a revealed will, roughly 80% will attend mass for baptism, marriage and funerals. When asked about their belonging to one or another religion, life stance group or lifestyle group a variety of answers obtained. A small majority declared that lifestyles are undep, shallow and can be adopted regardless of one's worldview. The same group, joined by some other adolescents, would hold that one is either a believer in one or another religion or a humanist-freethinker. The choice between these two has nothing to do, however, with the lifestyle or lifestyles one engages in. The latter speaks about clothing, leisure activities, tastes, social values and according to the interviewees these choices can be made next to and independent of the belief systems. A tiny minority of the group (less than 10

in the total sample of over 200) claimed that they took a stand in life by adopting a lifestyle first and foremost. For them, a lifestyle is a substitute for a religion. It is to be noted that these views of the adolescent group seem to break away on important points from those in the former examples: mixture of beliefs and practices from different meaning systems is regarded rather pragmatically as unproblematic; being selective in adopting beliefs and in picking and choosing lifestyle options does not pose a problem either; and it is unclear whether or to what extent a rule of consistency or of 'full personhood' is still held onto.

(vi) Empirical data from other sources are not abundant, but they underscore that similar trends are emerging with adolescents and young adults around the world:

- In a rare comparative study Kronjee (2006) makes the point that American inspired lifestyles become dominant in the USA and in Europe, yielding a different status for religions. The latter becomes a surplus for particular choices in life (death, birth, marriage) rather than the foundation for major questions on the meaning of life, or on issues of quality of life (choice of jobs, partner, family planning, sex, etc.). On the other hand some groups seem to withdraw in a stricter religious or life stance perspective, yielding a growth of fundamentalist groups who aim for political power. In a somewhat similar line of thought one can argue that the privatization of religion in Europe produces the co-existence of various stands next to each other.
- Although the organizations which promote humanism and atheism prove to be relatively unknown in Belgium and The Netherlands (Cramer, 1999, and M. Leentvaar-Braakman, 1992) the values of a secular society and the principles of an autonomous moral individual (in contrast to the heteronomy of the moral stand in a theocratic worldview) prevail. In a recent empirical study the role of churches in discussions about major ethical issues such as euthanasia proves to be ever more dwindling (Verté, 2006). At the European level, the general trend found in the latter study is clearly corroborated by Lambert's comparative sociological study: "On the rise are: religious faith as a quality to encourage to learn at home, attachment to ceremonies for birth, marriage, and death, the feeling that

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to my students (2007-2008) who helped me in this. Over 50 of them worked in groups conducting the interviews.

churches bring answers to spiritual needs [...] belief in life after death (from 38% to 44%), in hell (from 16% to 23%), and in heaven (from 30% to 35%). Still in significant decline are the following: religious belonging, [...] church attendance, [...] and the importance granted to God” (Lambert, 2004, p. 33).

- Examples of similar studies could be multiplied, but I will only mention one more study, expanding the focus beyond Europe and allowing to appreciate the role of the urban factor. A recent study by anthropologist F. Fleisher (2007) shows how young adult affluent Chinese urbanites are instantiating a major shift in Chinese society today. Their choice for a home, a neighbourhood and a circle of friends and acquaintances are rapidly being determined by lifestyle values, rather than family or tradition. Fleisher estimates that this trend is so pervasive that it will alter Chinese society in a fundamental way: we may be witnessing the birth of a dual society with one rural society continuing to be ordered by tradition and one urban society structured by cosmopolitan lifestyle formats.

## Analyzing the examples

The sketchy outline of my own empirical data, and the illustrative mention of more systematic empirical studies on similar issues, should suffice to give at the very least a taste of the issues I want to address. My major intention, however, is not to present empirical data, but rather to question them along the lines of the three dimensions I isolated: urbanization (of the world), cosmopolitics and new notions of self.

The typical cosmopolitanism of the ‘believers’ can be summed up as follows: the belief system they stand for suffices in itself to live as a human being. It is held to have the potential to be the right way for all human beings. In the literature this feature is often captured by claiming a universal status for the particular belief system. Indeed, this is an intrinsic feature of the Christian and the Muslim (with their zeal of conversion of the whole of humanity), which explains their joint efforts in example 2. It obtains in a different way for the laicist view, with the rather vague statement that a so-called ‘neutral’ moral and political platform can be defined for humanity as a whole (example 4). The nature of this ‘universality’ is rather particular: in the theologies of the Mediterranean religions it is said that God created humankind and ordered to be obeyed on the basis of a set of laws of conduct. The attitude attached to this conviction

is what holds my attention here: in fact, the attitude is to take for granted that ‘what is good/right/true for me is good/right/true for all human beings’. So, universality is not so much a description of what is factually universal, but rather a presupposition of the universal validity of what is held to be good/right/true for me. This justifies, in the eyes of the religious believers and of the laicist the universalization or the universal implementation (through conversion or through a discourse on universal rights) of the particular on a worldwide scale. That this attitude yields perverse and decidedly unjustifiable results may be illustrated perhaps most forcibly in the non-religious applications.

Thus, Mattei e Nader (2008) investigate how the seemingly ‘neutral’ rule of law is presently justifying plunder of resources, indeed at a global scale. In Hermans e Dimaggio (2004) this universalistic status attributed to a world view or a religion is seen as typical for the first two stages of the evolution of self in our culture. In the first stage, that of the pre-modern era and that of the subsequent modern era. In the first stage a moralistic, integral and exclusive view is promoted and continued through education in this part of the world in the format of the Christian worldview (and in other parts of the world by Islam). The subsequent modern is reacting against the former by claiming a sovereign, mechanistic and individualised self. This is best and most elaborately expressed in the laicist view. However, the modern self is also a master discourse, and in that respect retains essential features of the pre-modern self: it is THE alternative (for humankind), to the religious self and hence excludes diversity (as is clearly seen today in the debates on the multicultural society in general, and on the headscarf in particular). It is only in the post-modern or third era that the idea of a universalizable master discourse is attacked in principle. In that era different, eventually conflicting ‘truths’ exist and are advocated, thus in fact moving away from the ambition and even the status of universalizable ‘good/right/truth’ (e.g., Derrida is an icon for that era). This implies that universalistic claims and the understanding that what could be declared universal can constitute the core of a cosmopolitan or worldwide blueprint. This is exactly the historical identification (or, from my perspective, the default) of ‘universality equals cosmopolitanism’ which is shared both by the pre-modern self and its critic (i.e., the modern self). It is only with the post-modern self that this equation is questioned: universalibility (intrinsic for the religions of the book and for the Enlightenment philosophy) is problematized and the notion of cosmopolitanism is, obviously, dropped.

My suggestion is that now, in what Hermans (2004) calls the era of the dialogical self (as the fourth era),

a new cosmopolitanism should be advocated. Indeed, after the critical assessment of the world views of the pre-modern and the modern era in the post-modern view, we now wake up in a world that has become more interdependent and more intertwined than ever before, also in the consciousness of people (and hence in the concept of self that emerges). My point is that, once we disconnect cosmopolitanism from universality, we can start constructing a different notion and practice of cosmopolitics, and at the same time position ourselves in a more modest way than that of (selfdeclared) universality. That is, we can investigate what cosmopolitan platform would be feasible, workable and wanted on the basis of the comparative assessment and the negotiated agreement of what is needed in the world of today. That is my first proposal: a notion of cosmopolitanism which results from comparison and negotiation in a diverse world. Having said all this, it is clear that Hermans' views themselves are still guilty of this old universalism. Or put differently, Hermans (2004) seems to presuppose that all humankind went through the three stages of self to land on the dialogical self planet today. This is not said by the author, but there is no sign at all of a comparative perspective in his works, so the universalistic pretension is implied. It is obvious that this stand should be critically assessed: different cultural traditions may well have different notions of self and even different histories of self. As far as we know, this is basically unknown country (except for a few studies such as Kirkpatrick, Hsu and a few others), but universality should at the very least be questioned.

The second dimension I want to take into account to interpret the data is that of urbanisation. By any measure urbanisation (and with it the ICT communication technology of today) of the present era is rapid, pervasive and ever more dominant over the generations. To the extent that the traditional belief systems (both the religions of the book and the non-believers stand of atheist and agnostic venture) addressed kinship groups and village or small city societies (Pinxten e Dikomitis, 2006), it likely that these belief systems are not really prepared for or even incapable of dealing adequately with the so-called impersonal, global and inexorably diverse context of the modern urban complex. Whatever one may think, the so-called urban context of the past (the pre-modern and the modern period which Hermans talks about) saw only 10% of humankind living in cities in 1900, versus over 60% one century later. Moreover, the very phenomenon of cities of millions is a recent phenomena (having over 20 cities with 20 million inhabitants or more in 2000: Davis, 2007). In this kind of context social, religious and cultural diversity is a dominant feature, or put in other

words: it is essential that city dwellers be able to live and cope with difference.

Both the pre-modern and modern self are likely to become notions under attack in these contexts. Put differently: to the extent that a unique, consistent and presumably universalisable worldview is held onto, the subject is likely to run into ever more frustration or embitterment. In that same context the notion of a dialogical self which focuses on the ways to deal with difference rather than with identity is a promising one.

The final dimension is that of changes in personhood. This point is treated in detail in Hermans (2004), where psychotherapeutic and social psychological approaches on the dialogical self are investigated. The authors make subtle distinctions between the so-called 'multiple personality' or 'split person' syndromes where a person 'looses himself in complex situations' since different and/or conflicting aspects of the person are addressed in different contexts. In the pre-modern and the modern eras the model of a consistent and in a sense self-sufficient self could adequately work for subjects living in a mono-cultural and basically mono-religious cultural context. In the present time, where living with difference is rapidly becoming the primary challenge, it is to be expected that the old notion of person comes under attack as well. In my appreciation as an anthropologist, the older notions of integral person as they are exemplified to a large extent in the examples 1-4, of older people holding power positions in the so-called - "pillar society" of the past decades - are gradually dissipating together with the 'pillar society'. That is to say, even when the leadership tries to build fully integrated or consistent Christians (example 1), Muslims (example 3) or laicists (example 4) the mixed and rapidly changing world of experience of these young people seems to bring them more and more to a development of a self, composed of elements from different world views (example 5). The way I interpret this is that a shift is taking place at a deeper, maybe subliminal level: young people seem to 'go shopping' in world view material and not to care too much about ideological consistency: they take a bit of Christianity (especially for the rites of passage), a bit of laicist views (e.g. on abortion and euthanasia, regardless of their religious belonging), a bit of Buddhism or New Age (e.g., some meditation), and so on. This calls for a new procedure and the theory of the dialogical self seems especially appropriate here. However, to the extent that the developing a self is a process of socialization and enculturation, the notion of person with used here is important. My proposal is that a shift may be happening here as well: the mono-cultural consistent person is a self growing from a non-person to a 100% person through the

series of initiation rites (from *e.g.* baptism to marriage). In the new predicament the more adequate perspective, in line with the notion of the dialogical self, is that of the deployment of a self of at the most a partial person: One is a man as a partial person, thus recognizing not to be a woman, but leaving the exploration of the feminine open. One's also a Frenchman as a partial person, and hence not a Turk or a Chinese, but leaving openings again for the selves one is not. In terms of education and of positioning oneself in mixed and changing world, the notion of the partial person seems more promising and less frustrating than the old notion of the 'full person' who is Christian, atheist, or whatever in a consistent and exclusive way. In that perspective I understand the notion of dialogical self as indeed an adequate mechanism in the contexts of the contemporary person.

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Submetido: 10/04/2018  
Aceito: 12/07/2018