

THEMES FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

# Community

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Seeking Safety in an  
Insecure World

by

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Polity



praise. That increasingly conservative mainstream is backed by the awesome powers of the consumer market and whatever remains of the once autonomous political institutions. The 'cool', Pountain and Robins suggest, 'appears to be usurping the work ethic to install itself as the dominant mindset of advanced consumer capitalism'. 'Cool' means 'flight from feeling', 'from the messiness of real intimacy, into the world of the easy lay, the casual divorce, and non-possessive relationships'.

Given a complete loss of faith in radical political alternatives, cool is now primarily about consumption. This is the missing 'cement' that fills the gaping contradiction - cool is the way to live with the lowered expectations by going shopping . . . Personal taste is elevated into a complete ethos; you are what you like, and what you therefore buy.

Though it carries many a trapping of personal autonomy and is conducted under the 'I need more space' slogan, the flight from the 'messiness of real intimacy' is more akin to a herd-like stampede than to an individually conceived and undertaken journey of self-exploration. The secession is hardly ever lonely - the escapees are keen to join company with other escapees like them, and the standards of the escapee life tend to be as stiff and demanding as those which have been found oppressive in the life left behind; the facility of casual divorce spawns imperatives as inflexible and intractable (and potentially as displeasing) as the wedlock without the escape clause. The sole attraction of the self-chosen exile is the absence of commitments, and particularly long-term commitments of the kind that cramp freedom of movement in a community with its 'messy intimacy'. With commitments replaced by fleeting encounters, the 'until further notice' or 'one night' (or one-day) stands, one can delete from

calculation the effects which one's action might have on the lives of others. The future may be as hazy and impenetrable as before, but at least this otherwise discomfiting trait does not matter much in a life lived as a string of episodes and a series of new beginnings.

Søren Kierkegaard<sup>20</sup> would probably find a striking affinity between the kind of life that lures the successful into secession, and the type of pathology he gleaned in the character of Don Giovanni as portrayed in the libretto of Mozart's opera. Don Juan's pleasure, as Kierkegaard saw it, was not the *possession* of women, but their *seduction*; Don Giovanni had no interest in the women already conquered - his pleasure stopped at the moment of triumph. Don Juan's sexual appetites were not necessarily more voracious or more insatiable than those of the next man; the point is, though, that the question of how great these appetites were was totally irrelevant to Don Juan's life formula, since his life was about keeping desire alive rather than about its satisfaction.

Only in this manner can Don Juan become epic, in that he constantly finishes, and constantly begins again from the beginning, for his life is the sum of repellent moments which have no coherence, his life as moment is the sum of the moments, as the sum of the moments is the moment . . .

Choosing the seduction of women as a major pastime was, to be sure, but an accidental attribute of Don Juan's life plan; it could be easily replaced by altogether different kinds of pleasure without detracting a wit from Don Juan's life strategy. To constantly finish, and to begin again from the beginning - that was the essence of Don Giovanni's life formula, and to be consistently applied that formula required, more than anything else, that no attachments should be fixed and no commitments entered, that no

Don Juan's life was about keeping desire alive rather than about its satisfaction.

consent should be given to bear the consequences of one's past pleasures: in other words, it postulated the *absence of community*. Don Juan was alone, and finding himself crowded by others like him would not change that status: a crowd of Don Giovannis would not make a community. The same may be said of the present-day successful in secession. The heavily guarded, electronically surveyed 'gated communities' into which the moment they get enough money or credit they buy themselves to keep their distance from the 'messy intimacy' of ordinary city life are 'communities' in name only. What their residents are prepared to pay an arm and a leg for is the right to stay aloof and be free from intruders. 'Intruders' are all other people guilty of having their own agendas and of living their lives in their own ways. The nearness of other agendas and alternative ways of life undermines the comforts of 'finishing quickly and beginning from the beginning' and for this reason 'intruders' are resented as obtrusive and vexing. 'Prowlers' and 'stalkers' are the fear-and-hate figures of the present-day Don Giovannis, and it is freedom from such characters, promised by the heavily armed guards constantly on the beat and a dense network of electronic spy cameras, that makes 'gated communities' so alluring and avidly sought after and becomes a point which the developers and estate agents of such communities emphasize much more than any other feature in their commercial handouts and advertising leaflets.

The world inhabited by the new elite is not however defined by their 'permanent address' (in the old-fashioned physical or topographic sense). Their world has no 'permanent address' except for the e-mail one and the mobile telephone number. The new elite is not defined by any locality: it is truly and fully *exterritorial*. Exterritoriality alone is guaranteed to be a community-free zone, and the new 'global elite' who, except for the inescapable (and

occasionally pleasurable) company of *mâitres d'hôtels*, room-maids and waiters, are its only population wants it to be such a zone.

Respondents to the 'Cultural Globalization Study' conducted by the Institute of Advanced Study in Culture of the University of Virginia,<sup>21</sup> men and women fairly representative of the new exterritorials, entertain no doubts on that point. An AT&T executive avers that he and his co-travellers 'would consider themselves the sort of citizens of the world who happen to carry an American passport'. As the authors of the report conclude from the vast range of responses they have collected, 'they see national boundaries and nation-states as increasingly irrelevant to the main action of life in the twenty-first century.' A Nike executive was quite adamant about his exterritoriality and dismissive of those who think otherwise: 'the only people who will care about national boundaries are politicians.'

Being exterritorial does not mean, though, being a carrier of a new global cultural synthesis, or even establishing links and communication channels between cultural areas and traditions. There is a very narrow, if any, interface between the 'territory of exterritoriality' and the lands in which its various outposts and half-way inns happen to be physically located. As the Virginia researchers point out, the global executives they interviewed

live and work in a world made up of constant travel between the major global metropolitan centres - Tokyo, New York, London, and Los Angeles. They spend no less than a third of their time abroad. When abroad, most respondents tend to interact and socialize with other 'globalizers' ... Wherever they go, the hotels, health clubs, restaurants, offices, and airports are all virtually identical. There is a sense in which they inhabit a socio-cultural bubble that is insulated from the harsher differences

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between national cultures . . . They are cosmopolitans to be sure, but in ways that are very limited and insular.

Let's make clear what the authors of the report (and the authors of numerous other reports by researchers and journalists, all painting a strikingly similar picture) are talking about here. Let us ask what the meaning is of that 'cosmopolitanism', the word that tends to be used ever more often in descriptions of the lifestyle of the 'globalizers' and in their self-definitions alike? To what sort of experience and to what cultural traits does this newly fashionable word refer?

Whatever else the 'cosmopolitanism' of the new global elite may be, it is *born to be selective*. It is singularly unfit for the role of a 'global culture': this model cannot be spread, disseminated, universally shared, used as the standard-to-be-emulated in a proselytizing/converting mission. As such, it differs from cultures we know and know of, those diverse models of 'life decent and proper' which throughout the modern era used to be held before the eyes of 'people' by their intellectual leaders, teachers, moral preachers and other 'reformers' and 'improvers'. The 'cosmopolitan' lifestyle of the new secessionists is not meant for mass imitation, and the 'cosmopolitans' are not the apostles of a new and better life model and not an avant-garde of an advancing army. What their lifestyle celebrates is the irrelevance of place, a condition most conspicuously beyond the reach of ordinary folks, of the 'natives' tied fast to the ground and (in case they try to disregard the shackles) likely to meet in the 'big wide world out there' sullen and unfriendly immigration officers rather than invitingly smiling hotel receptionists. The message of the 'cosmopolitan' way of being is simple and blunt: it does not matter *where* we are, what matters is that *we* are there.

The travels of the new cosmopolitans are not voyages of discovery. Though it is often described as such by the global travellers and their biographers, their lifestyle is not 'hybrid', nor is it particularly notable for its fondness of variety. Sameness is its most conspicuous feature, and it is precisely the worldwide uniformity of pastimes and the globe-wide similarity of cosmopolitan haunts that the cosmopolitan identity is made up of, and that culturally construes and sustains their collective secession from the variety of natives. Inside the many islands of the cosmopolitan archipelago the public is kept homogeneous, the rules of admission are strict and meticulously (even when informally) enforced, the standards of conduct are precise and exacting and demand unconditional conformity. As in all 'gated communities', the likelihood of meeting a genuine stranger and facing a genuine cultural challenge is reduced to an unavoidable minimum; such strangers as cannot be *physically* removed due to the indispensability of the role they play in servicing the isolation and illusory 'self-containment' of the cosmopolitan islands are eliminated *culturally* - cast into the background of the 'invisible' and the 'taken for granted'.

More than anything else, the 'bubble' in which the new cosmopolitan business and culture-industry global elite spend most of their lives is - let me repeat - a *community-free zone*. It is a site where a togetherness understood as a *sameness* (or, more precisely, an insignificance of idiosyncrasies) of casually encountered and 'irrelevant on demand' individuals - and an individuality understood as a trouble-free facility with which partnerships are entered and left - are daily practised to the exclusion of all other socially shared practices. The 'secession of the successful' is, first and foremost, escape from community.

*cosmopolitanism is the only place where sameness is togetherness & sameness*

*\*  
W. G. Sebald  
J. M. Coetzee  
S. L. Carter  
M. H. Deitch*