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**Review of**  
***At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now***

by Timothy Brennan

The OED defines Cosmopolitan as "at home throughout the world or in many spheres of interest." While Timothy Brennan takes the first part of the definition as the title for his book *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now*, he might have used the second part to describe his analysis of how the culture of cosmopolitanism depends on a cross-fertilization among different "spheres of interest" from the humanities to transnational corporate culture and government policy. In *At Home in the World*, Brennan differentiates between globalism as a sociological fact and cosmopolitanism as an intellectual ethic as his wide-ranging critique moves deftly from literary theory and media intellectuals to business gurus and governmental advisors. Written in the jargon-free prose that characterizes the *Convergences* series (and its editor, Edward Said), Brennan's provocative argument that contemporary cultural studies has been complicit with the ethics of global capitalism is one that cannot be ignored by anyone interested in the future of the academic left and cultural studies.

The recent emergence of a discourse of cosmopolitanism is not limited to the academy but is also the story of increasing US influence and power in the world. The humanities, Brennan argues, have contributed to the theorization of the new social subject that has accompanied this hegemonic influence. This subject "knows" that nationalism is a failed concept and that "we are all cosmopolitans" now (as Brennan quotes Paul Rabinow). Thus, if Brennan describes his book as a "self-critique" it is not without an enlarged sense of "self." The dispersal of the ego here involves almost every respected cultural theorist now working. In his highly provocative critiques of theorists such as Arjun Appadurai, Andrew Ross, and James Clifford, Brennan argues that critical cultural theory depends too strongly on arguments against nativism and "narrow-minded" nationalism. While he is supportive of most of their work, he is critical of how their methodology valorizes a new cosmopolitan subject without sufficiently critiquing cosmopolitanism itself. Cultural theorists, Brennan argues, have too easily accepted the premise of globalization while ignoring its local effects or its particularly American character. He notes how cosmopolitan cultural theory needs certain monolithic "necessary fictions" such as nativism, nationalism, the binarism of colonizer and colonized, and the base-superstructure model from Marxism (94,106), to argue against in order to do its work. As Brennan argues: "[a] large space separates a false pastoral from the types of community possible in a pretechnocratic modernity" (95). His critique shows how current methodology excludes this space from analysis and the disturbing ramifications of its dismissal.

3. In a crucial chapter devoted to "cosmopolitanism and methodology," Brennan shows how these necessary fictions inform Andrew Ross's work on Polynesian tourism. For Brennan, Ross's method confines the native in a circular logic:

Very much like Appadurai and Garcia Canclini, Ross repudiates the idea of a native who can, in fact, be lost or who needs to be recovered. Without ceding grounds to a modernization narrative that would simply put the welcome mat down for invading venture capitalists, Ross nevertheless finds himself most aroused to ire by a top-heavy, nostalgic bluster over ethnic traditions endangered by the modern. There is, in other words, room in this universe for the word "exploitation," and there are passages (usually in the

footnotes) that concede its relevance. But to avoid further mischief of the type minted by the conquistadors themselves -- who, like some of today's most doctrinally diligent scholars protecting native rights, knew they were doing the natives good -- Ross targets the very idea of a happier native in a preferable past. Determined to drop the scales of "nature" from eyes that need to see culturally, he draws inevitably on James Clifford's idea of "salvage ethnography," in which the Other always seems suspiciously to be in danger of disappearing at the very moment ethnography arrives to record it. (89)

Once the idea of an Edenic past becomes more of a concern than an exploited present we have reached a point where, Brennan would suggest, cosmopolitanism is doing the writing rather than being written about. In this wide-ranging chapter he identifies three methodological fallacies in cultural studies: circularity, complexity, and identity. Circularity is "the demonstration of the complicity of critique in the very things it is criticizing, or of showing moments of inescapability..."(88). While Brennan notes that much of this work is useful (such as recuperating native agency) he criticizes a methodology where the native's past is revised as an "invented tradition" and then condemned to a commodified present. By "complexity" Brennan refers to a critical ethics in which a certain literary style becomes a consensual idiom of analysis. This stylistic critique is significant since part of his purpose is the recuperation of critics, writers, and activists whose works have been neglected for not measuring up to an academic standard of "literariness." A dilemma for academic cultural studies is that its objects of study are often extra-literary in their form and style; as he asks: "How does one deal with the embarrassing fact that important concepts are themselves often uninteresting as expressive means -- that, say, in spite of their obvious historical impact, the declarations of Patrice Lumumba and Fidel Castro are boring as works of literature?" (81). However, as smart and far-reaching as his critique of complexity goes, it is a hard criticism to make since Brennan himself benefits from his own extreme literariness and capacity to make provocative and unlikely comparisons. Against the identity politics of multiculturalism, Brennan argues for a politics of positionality where the value of nativism is not so much where a person is born (or the class one is born into) but an individual's "situatedness in a place" and, most importantly, his or her political position. He believes that cultural studies has focused too much on concepts of race and class at the neglect of political positioning, thus moving away from direct engagement and too closely mimicking the globalizing style of world culture to be truly critical.

In arguing that cultural studies has been more focused on "representation than means of representation," Brennan tries to recuperate an alternative genealogy of Anglo-American cultural studies. Brennan considers the claims of affiliation with British literary criticism, American sociology, and Althusserian structuralism, to be "misleading," and he proposes a return to its source in communication studies such as Richard Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy* and the work of Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall on newspaper culture. While I want to defuse some of Brennan's sense of discovery (I don't believe that the fact that most people prefer to read *Culture and Society* over *Contact: Communication and Its History* necessarily constitutes "systematic" ignorance), it is useful to recall this lineage in order to understand how cultural studies frames its objects of study.

Brennan shows how this work might be applied to cosmopolitanism by turning his critical eye to the culture of the Transnational Corporations. Bringing together Orwell and Kristeva with Henry Kissinger and business guru Tom Peters, Brennan reveals how arguments on the demise of the nation-state -- in the humanities and the corporation -- rely on the threat of the nation-state; that is, as a challenge presented to global capital. Integral to this shared cosmopolitan ethic is an emphasis on diversity and hybridity that depends on a revisionist view of history in which everyone is taught how to "see culturally." For Brennan, discourses of postnationalism within corporate culture intersect with those being celebrated in the humanities: "Current cultural theory aids this myth of having no choice, of the economy being less about physical toil than about the enticing ephemera of 'skills' and 'images'" (162). By ignoring or downplaying the significance of the local in the global -- particularly the manifestations of Americanness abroad -- cosmopolitan cultural critics avoid a direct engagement with economic realities and find corporate America as their fellow traveling companion.

Brennan's argument is not a rehearsal of conservative attacks on "Theory" but rather a focus on how literary method contributes to the construction of literary value. Following Bourdieu, Brennan is concerned with the "matrix of codes of conduct and intellectual procedures that precede what is normally called theory" (67). One of Brennan's insights is the crucial role of the literary sensibility, or "ideology of the literary," in framing the object of cultural studies. Brennan argues that in order to "avoid an undifferentiated third-world literature" we need "a greater investment in a vastly expanded comparatism" (267). A new comparatism would broaden the scope of cultural studies from the purely or phenomenally "literary." When writing about literature in a time of high cosmopolitanism, then, it is necessary to draw attention to the various medias (such as book markets, educational anthologies, and public policy [311]) in which literature is now produced. While the first half of *At Home in the World* is mostly a critique of cultural studies, the second half offers three insightful and challenging analyses: Brennan uses Subcomandante Marcos's writings as a model for critiquing globalism as an entity and cosmopolitanism as an ethic; he finds in CLR James's method in *American Civilization* a way in which a healthy cosmopolitanism might contribute to a critical cultural studies; and in his rich recuperation of Alejo Carpentier's novel *The Lost Steps* and his essays on Afro-Cuban music, Brennan offers a way of reading the crucial interaction of the popular and the national that is reminiscent of Paul Gilroy at his best.

Brennan's book is imperative for anyone interested in the role of the left in the academy. His critique of cultural studies methodology is particularly timely as it appears as an antidote to the circling of the wagons that occurred after the Sokal affair. That is, while he points to some of the same faults as Sokal - "complexity" as a critical ethics, cultural studies as reactionary to "knee-jerk liberalism" -- he is not as anti-intellectual and, most importantly, offers an alternative methodology which comes out of and extends a left tradition in cultural studies. Also, not shy to examine the hand that feeds him, as he notes that postcolonial studies has become a symbolic affirmative action policy in academic hiring practices. This type of criticism is relevant coming from Brennan as his own training ground, Columbia's Department of English and Comparative Literature, recently lost its reputation as a leading department for postcolonial studies due mainly to the extended (losing) tenure battles of Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon. Their cases only reinforce Brennan's focus on methodology since these two critics, whose work has attempted the kind of comparatism that he calls for, have been punished by the academic system for going outside the bounds of "literary study." A recent proposal by the Columbia English Department for hiring preferences which classifies Postcolonial studies as a "Field" along with 18th and 19th century appointments rather than as an "Area" where methodologies such as Feminism or Marxism are listed, demonstrates its relegation to a third-world tokenism. The proposal emphasizes the temporal aspect of the neologism Post-colonial, making it a hypostatized theoretical category with its own assumed values and canonical texts rather than a methodology with concerns and interventions, both political and literary, that might be more broadly applied. However, in the face of these administrative bulwarks, Brennan's book makes a convincing argument that this kind of critical work is still necessary. While his strident and, at times, polemical tone may prove difficult for some readers, anyone — whether in agreement or not — should leave it with a comprehensive alternate genealogy of culture in this century as well as a heightened awareness of the global culture of the next.

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