

Suffering Close and Far. Cosmopolitanism as Identity Work¹

Laura Robinson²
Santa Clara University

Resumo

This paper illuminates the use of cosmopolitan identity frames in response to suffering caused by the 9/11/01 attacks in the U.S. Drawing on empirical data from Brazilian, French, and American digital discourse spaces, the analysis reveals the use of cosmopolitan and transnational identity frames to identify with those suffering. To do so, individuals redefine and expand identity boundaries to include those suffering through discourses bridging the distance between observer and sufferer. The case studies of cosmopolitan identity work presented point to the potential of inclusionary identity work in which the suffering of others is shared by strangers. As the Brazilian case shows, when such thinking predominates, “humanity” becomes the primary identity category of importance.

Palavras-chave: suffering, identity, cosmopolitanism(s), transnationalism, nationalism, and humanity

Introduction

Drawing on empirical data from Brazilian, French, and American digital discourse spaces, the analysis in this chapter illuminates the use of universalistic and transnational identity frames to identify with those suffering in the wake of 9/11/01. More specifically, this chapter asks three questions. First, what was the range of cosmopolitan stances used to classify others’ suffering as worthy of compassion? Second, what forms of identity work facilitated empathy with those suffering? Third, what cultural frames influenced how individuals framed similarities or erased boundaries between themselves and those suffering?

To answer these questions, this chapter analyzes the construction of cosmopolitan identity categories used to make sense of victims’ identities on 9/11/01. To make these connections, the analysis explores how individuals performed identity work that created expansive identity categories as a means of expressing solidarity. The analysis of cosmopolitan identity work presented here points to the potential of inclusionary identity work in which the suffering of others is shared. As the Brazilian case tells us, when such thinking predominates, “humanity” becomes the primary identity category of importance.

In so doing, this chapter contributes to the literature on cosmopolitanism. Often cosmopolitan thinking refers to “moral cosmopolitanism” defined as the “moral ideal of a

¹ Trabalho apresentado no VI Colóquio Brasil-Estados Unidos de Ciências da Comunicação, evento componente do XXXVII Congresso Brasileiro de Ciências da Comunicação.

² Assistant Professor, Santa Clara University – California, US

universal human community” (Kleingeld and Brown 2011). However, cosmopolitan identities exist along a continuum and allow individuals to identify with a range of supranational communities. At their most narrow, cosmopolitan identities produce empathy when observers make connections between themselves and those suffering. Further along the continuum, cosmopolitan identities may be transnational and build upon similarities linking citizens from different nation states. In their broadest incarnation, cosmopolitan identities can be completely universalistic and have the power to compete with national identities in importance (Jameson 1982). When individuals espousing a cosmopolitan stance regard themselves as world citizens, the suffering of all of humanity becomes equally salient and worthy of solidarity. Thus we see that contrary to much social science literature assuming the nation state as the dominant identity category (Beck 2000), cosmopolitan identities may also yield considerable salience.

2 Data and Methods

Scholarship continues to show the importance of the Internet as a venue to collect data on narratives of suffering (Anderson 2014). This chapter follows this tradition by drawing on data from three discourse communities hosted by flagship newspapers in Brazil, France, and the U.S.: *O Estado de São Paulo*, *Le Monde*, and *The New York Times*. Part of a larger project (Robinson 2005, 2008, and 2009), the sampling frame is the universe of contributions posted to the three sites during the week following the attacks. From September 11 to September 17, 2001 individuals wrote 2,905 posts to *The New York Times*’ “A Nation Challenged,” 2,264 posts to *Le Monde*’s “The September 11th attacks in the United States,” and 1,119 posts to *O Estado*’s “The First War of the Century.”

Data in this chapter come from posts expressing solidarity with the victims, their families, and/or concern with collective suffering. Therefore, the data include only posts specifically addressing these themes analyzed through iterated coding and recoding. I began open coding to demarcate analytic categories. Subsequently, I wrote initial memos concentrating on core themes identified in open coding before proceeding to focused coding to refine the analytic categories. Rounds of focused coding and integrative memos grounded the analysis in the data.

3 Universalistic Cosmopolitanism

Brazilian cosmopolitans identify with those suffering as members of the human family independent of any other identity category. The Brazilian case offers an exemplar of cosmopolitanism at its most universalizing. For Brazilian cosmopolitans, the suffering of all members of humanity is equally relevant:

It is when the other is suffering, when the consequences are such that all must help each other and ask for help...The worst is when one does not want to see one's sick and sad brother and one does not pray together to ask for peace for mankind and good will to men.

Further, these cosmopolitans frame the extension of empathy as a moral imperative. As one Brazilian cosmopolitan argues: "Anyone with a conscience should mourn the death of thousands of civilians and ask God to comfort the families of the unfortunates." By using this inclusionary strategy, cosmopolitanism extends empathy to the suffering other and marginalizes other identity categories: "We have no right to sacrifice any human life for political motives or other ideologies. Terrorism is a great error. I mourn and pray for the dead in this sad act that they may have peace."

By including all members of humanity as "brothers," they explicitly denationalize victims and dismiss any other identity category as irrelevant. This Brazilian cosmopolitan writes: "The best thing we can do is for all countries to show their solidarity with our American brothers. In these moments, differences do not exist!" Another adds: "The value of life is the same in all places: priceless." A third contributes, "It is a pity that so many innocents died in this terrible story. Humanity must evolve a great deal here on earth." Brazilian cosmopolitans employ the category of humanity to unite themselves with those suffering: "Humanity watched...those innocent human beings of innumerable nations that were assassinated in this horrible and unforgettable day." Further, they extend empathy to those left behind: "What I am terribly sad for are the loved ones of those who have died." Another adds: "I feel terribly for these people's deaths and would like to tell their families that only God can measure the depth and intensity of their pain, indignation, and sadness." Whether in reference to the victims themselves or their loved ones, cosmopolitan Brazilians emphasize humanity as the only salient aspect of the victims' identities.

Imagine the families' desperation looking for their relatives. They are lives and lives that were lost. How many fathers, family men, died--people who never think of political oppression. We should cry for this tragedy just as we should cry for people who die of violence in Brazil...We are all human....right?

Another exhorts: "My condolences to the Brazilian and American families, but principally to humanity, a small part of which died yesterday." In making these claims, Brazilian cosmopolitans erase boundaries between themselves, the victims, their families, and the rest of humanity.

Further, Brazilian cosmopolitans make larger commentaries on what it means to be human—at its best and worst. One describes: “Horror...horror...horror...I feel shame to be a human being.” Another comments: “Human beings are the greatest guilty party in all of this that has happened, for through global greed humanity respects no one.” Yet a third contributes: “I believe that what I am thinking is not terribly different than what the rest of the world is imagining. We are ashamed to be part of the same race as those responsible for this!” This cosmopolitan asserts: “How is it possible that the human race has decided to bring itself so low? We are all guilty in this tragedy. We all carry within us the feelings of hatred and intolerance.” These Brazilian cosmopolitans frame humanity as the ultimate symbolic perpetrator of 9/11/01. They believe that because humanity is capable of great evil, as members of humanity, every human shares in the guilt. As this cosmopolitan asserts: “What has happened is the fruit of greed, religion, politics, economics, in short what we call being human.” Thus, Brazilian cosmopolitans argue that 9/11/01 provides an opportunity to reconsider what it should mean to be human: “Nothing justifies these acts. Perhaps humanity will think more about things that have been so forgotten like love, the environment, prosperity and equality between mankind. I hope that we can learn this lesson,” and “I hope that those responsible will be punished and made examples of and the world will come back to be more HUMAN...”

Brazilian cosmopolitans contribute the strongest expression of cosmopolitanism as an ideology that symbolically divides humanity against those that would destroy it. For them, every human faces the fundamental choice between the good and evil both present in humankind:

Terrible? Brutal? We humans need to stop and reflect about all that happened, is happening, and will happen, about evil created by human beings, we need to understand and stop and think of ourselves and use our free will, each of us to change the World. If the World continues selfishly, evilly, and continues to shut its eyes to poverty, pain, etc. the end will be next, much worse than we think! But there is time; we can all change. My thoughts go to the victims.

Others also divide the world into the “human” and “inhuman.” One relates: “...all of humanity suffers the consequences of the inhuman acts committed today.” The use of the word “inhuman” is significant and taken up by others: “An attack of these proportions demonstrates to the world the extreme treachery of these groups of terrorists... the death of thousands of people, innocent victims of this brutal attack is an inhuman act.” For Brazilian cosmopolitans, all members of humanity must make their choice and choose a side:

For me it was obvious that there are two worlds that are absolutely different: the first is made up of people who are born and work for their neighbor, for society.

People like us, who despite whatever difficulty, day-to-day struggle for what is best. The second type of being, which we cannot call human, only is born to grow up to sow hatred, destruction, unjustified death, in truth the horsemen of the Apocalypse who decide who will live and who will die. We must not allow ourselves to be influenced by this feeling of hatred and in turn create more destruction.

Brazilian cosmopolitans frame this choice as the ultimate identity marker and the choice that must be made by all members of humanity in response to every kind of human suffering.

4 Transnational Cosmopolitanism

Turning to the French forum, identity work may resemble discourse in the Brazilian forum at first glance, but upon closer inspection reveals important differences. Like their Brazilian counterparts, French cosmopolitans link 9/11/01's victims with the victims of other tragedies, such as terrorist bombing in Paris:

I feel so close to those who have died. I work in a tower at La Défense, and the images of those towers collapsing haunt me. Those who worked there worked many kinds of jobs, secretaries, accountants, janitors, etc. like those whose paths I cross every day at my work. They were not soldiers. They must have been of all races and religions.... Human history is no more than a vast repetition; the same horrors repeat themselves...

Also parallel to Brazilian cosmopolitans, French cosmopolitans frame those suffering as worthy of solidarity:

The authors did not choose their target to destroy an American landmark; they wanted and determined to destroy the greatest number of human lives, regardless whether they were Christian, Muslim, or Jewish. They were all present in and around the WTC towers. They spared no one.

At first French discourse may seem similar to the universalistic cosmopolitanism expressed by Brazilians. However, whereas Brazilian cosmopolitans employ the concept of "humanity," even the most expansive French cosmopolitans rarely refer to "humanity" when expressing empathy.

Rather, French cosmopolitans emphasize their nationality when asserting the transnational bond: "I understand your heartache and I share it, yet understand that I myself am French.... accept from me and from many others the assurance that, despite a few insignificant quibbles, we are at your side." Another writes, "I am not American, I am French... you can count on your longtime friends..." This pattern is also clear regarding the three minutes of silence observed in the European Union to honor the victims on the Friday following 9/11/01. French cosmopolitans describe the three minutes of silence as an expression of Franco-American unity:

The French news showed how the 3 minutes of silence were observed throughout the country. It was gut wrenching. It made me proud to be French... Make no mistake, some of us French people are ready to die for America like your grandfathers died for us.

Another echoes, "Today, the French observed 3 minutes of silence in memory of the victims of the attacks and I assure you that I could read real emotion on the faces of those people around me." Other French cosmopolitans also highlight French nationality in their expressions of transnational solidarity: "The real France stood still for three minutes today to honor your deaths... The real France was deeply shocked by the attacks... We really felt attacked. The real France is with you."

In lieu of "humanity," the French adopt a more transnational cosmopolitanism based on shared democratic values. French cosmopolitans' solidarity with those suffering is expressed as a function of the democratic heritage they share with the U.S. as citizens of the French Republic: "I entirely approve of the affirmation of support given to the United States by the President of the Republic and the Prime Minister; in the case of grave crisis like this one, democracies must forget their differences and close their ranks against their adversaries."

Here it is important to note the use of the word adversaries used to define those who commit acts of terror, particularly terrorist acts framed as targeting democratic ideals or the democratic state: "Democratic values allow us to resolve our weaknesses, our contradictions, and our cowardice. Today I have chosen my camp and I support the American people. – An ordinary citizen." French emphasis on democracy indicates that this form of cosmopolitanism is rooted in shared transnational values, as well as a shared sense of vulnerability to terrorism: "I believe that many people on this forum showed their solidarity with Americans because they are conscious that in attacking the Americans, it is the way of life and the values that we, the French, share that is attacked." French expressions of transnational solidarity rely on erasing boundary differences between France and the U.S. as "democracies," rather than between all members of "humanity." In the eyes of French cosmopolitans, the French system is the actualization of Western goals and values that serve as a model for other nations such as the United States. Therefore, the French cosmopolitans that express solidarity with the victims do so based on their shared commitment to democracy, as this cosmopolitan writes:

"This CRIME must simply be condemned. Compassion and indignation. DEMOCRACY."

5 Nationalism, Transnationalism, and Cosmopolitanism

In the American forum we see the full spectrum of identity frames that range from universalizing cosmopolitanism, to more circumscribed transnational cosmopolitanism, to nationalism. Regarding nationalism, not surprisingly, in immediate response to 9/11/01 many Americans call for national unity. While a number Americans reference larger collectivities, they do so in tandem with expressions of national identity. While they may refer to collectivities beyond American borders, they simultaneously define the object of empathy as closer to home: "...I think it is imperative that we stand by our American brothers and sisters in this time of crisis, remaining firmly committed to the democratic ideals that unite us across religious and ethnic boundaries." For these Americans, national unity is paramount even when used in parallel with transnational identity frames:

As I write, I am sitting in my office, in New York, watching as the sun prepares to set over the Hudson River. It is clear and beautiful out. Democracies are funny things -- anti-western despots can never understand them...they mistake our openness for weakness; our dynamic capitalism for self-centeredness. How do we answer them? E pluribus Unum. Out of many, one. America, and especially New York, will come out of this stronger than before.

In the days following the attacks, Americans are compelled by the forces of cultural trauma to situate themselves first and foremost as Americans who are also members of larger collectivities. When such Americans reference supranational identity frames, they typically couple them with references to national identity.

These Americans are joined on the forum by hundreds of citizens from other nations also expressing their solidarity. When the forum opens on the morning of September 12th, a flood of international empathy flows into the forum. As one explains, "Registering with this *New York Times* Message Board was the only way I could think of to communicate with some of the citizens of New York from a small town in the north of England." These international cosmopolitans present themselves as symbolically united with the victims in New York, Washington D.C., Pennsylvania, and the larger U.S. They come to the forum "...to let the inhabitants of New York and America know that they are not alone." The phrase "you are not alone" appears repeatedly: "I merely wanted to say to all who read this that you are not alone...and once again I say you are not alone."

Yet there are important differences in the international cosmopolitans participating in the American forum. Similar to the discourse in the French forum, European and "Anglosphere" (Vucetic 2011) cosmopolitans are more likely to rely on

transnational cosmopolitan identity frames based on membership in “democracies” or the “free” world. One declares: “This attack was not just on America, it was an attack on all the good and just people of the free world.” Such references to the “free world” resemble transnational discourse in the French forum much more closely than the universalistic cosmopolitanism dominant in the Brazilian forum. As this Australian cosmopolitan writes:

What I saw shook me to the core. I can’t begin to express the horror/shock/pain I felt. I’ve never been to the U.S. but somehow I’ve always felt that the U.S. represented the free world, & therefore my world. Since then I’ve sat glued to my television every moment I can, mourning with the families who’ve lost loved ones, praying with those still searching, rejoicing with each rescue of a victim & wishing for justice for those who organized this terrible thing. It’s frightening to have this happen to America, the country that represents strength, freedom & democracy. Seeing New York & Washington violated in such a way, made me realize how unsafe we all are against such attacks.

Another Spanish cosmopolitan declares: “Time for a Coalition of Democracies against Terrorism...We have a common enemy and let us work.” On behalf of her family, a German cosmopolitan adds:

Me and my family would like to assure you (and the American people) that we are very shocked about what happened not only to NY and Washington but also to the whole civilized world...We hope very much that the democratic countries will manage one day to stop terrorism.

While these transnational self-identifications are expansive, they frame solidarity in terms of the “democratic” or “free” world; thus mirroring the transnational cosmopolitanism on the French forum.

By contrast, expressions of universalizing cosmopolitanism are more likely to be contributed by citizens from democratic nations such as India. Contributions by these international cosmopolitans are parallel to the Brazilian use of “humanity” as the master identity frame. One writes: “We condemn the gravest act of barbarism against humanity where innocent people-men, women and children were so brutally massacred. May God receive them in heaven with open arms!” Another Indian cosmopolitan visits the American forum to express kinship with the victims and to condemn the attacks on “humanity”:

I offer my heartfelt condolences to the families of the innocent victims who tragically lost their lives in the worst ever attack on humanity, democracy and freedom...These acts are not against a nation but against humanity as a whole.

Significantly, despite coming from the world’s largest democracy, this Indian cosmopolitan places “humanity” ahead of either democracy or freedom because the terrorist

attacks violate “humanity as a whole.” Finally, this Argentine cosmopolitan employs universalistic discourse similar to that on the Brazilian forum: “From Argentina, what I can say is that here [the attacks] are seen as an act of cruelty...what they did was against humankind...The ones behind this to me can’t be considered human anymore...” Like Brazilian commentary dividing the world into the “human” and the “inhuman,” this Argentine cosmopolitan makes connections between the acts of 9/11/01 and what it should mean to be a member of humanity.

6 Conclusions

Across the cases, cosmopolitans do identity work to symbolically unite victims of 9/11/01 with larger collectivities. This being said, there are important differences between the identity frames at play. Brazilian cosmopolitans offer a completely inclusionary form of cosmopolitanism. In the Brazilian case, “humanity” grounds cosmopolitan identity frames that include all individuals united in the “day-to-day struggle for what is best” as members of the human family. By using “humanity” as the single most important identity category, they render the suffering of any human being as equally worthy of empathy and underscore the conviction that all members of humanity share in each other’s pain. Even more expansive, Brazilians make connections between those suffering on 9/11/01 and larger commentaries on what it should mean to be human. These findings resonate with previous research indicating the relevance of universalizing belief systems in contemporary Brazil (Pew-Templeton 2013). Brazilian references to “free will” and the “Horsemen of the Apocalypse” are part of larger spiritual belief systems for over 85% of the population (65% self-identify as Catholic and 22% as Protestant) (Pew-Templeton 2013). For these Brazilians, Catholicism and Protestantism are salient cognitive authorities (Burdick 1996).

In the French forum, the forms of cosmopolitan discourse articulated are related to very different cultural factors. French cosmopolitans adopt a more circumscribed version of transnational cosmopolitanism that nonetheless builds unity with those suffering. French cosmopolitans draw on national identity and link it to transnational kinship based on the long-shared history between the French Republic and the U.S. This emphasis on French national identity and the French Republic stems from the idea of “l’exception française” or “l’exception culturelle.” Both concepts refer to the idea of French exceptionalism in the realm of culture both at home and abroad: “The idea that France is somehow unique is deeply embedded in the nation’s self-image...It reflects the conviction that France has an

exemplary, universal role as a civilizing force...” (Jenkins 2000:112). Further, many of the French contributing to this forum would have lived through two series of terrorist bombings in France in the mid-1980s and 1990s. For these reasons, French cosmopolitans frame their solidarity in terms of democratic values they share with other democratic nations across time and space—values threatened by the specter of terrorism in both France and the United States.

Turning to the American forum, we see nationalism, transnational cosmopolitanism, and universalistic cosmopolitanism side by side. What is most interesting about the American forum is the mingling of multiple identity frames by international participants. Here we see important parallels between the French and Brazilians. Significantly, European and “Anglosphere” (Vucetic 2011) contributors are more likely to reference “democracy” as a shared transnational identity frame. While these self-identifications are expansive, they are similar to the French case. By contrast, nationals of India and Argentina are more similar to the Brazilians in their use of the expansive identify frame of “humanity.”

In making these connections, the chapter makes several contributions. First, it reveals the assumptions about the social world used to bolster the use of cosmopolitan identity frames. Second, the findings show how cosmopolitan perspectives allow us to frame the “other” as similar to ourselves. Third, the analysis points to new connections between cultural context and forms of cosmopolitanism. Finally, while 9/11/01 is a specific case, it demonstrates the range of discursive grammars or templates available to construct cosmopolitan identities as a means to express solidarity with victims of any disaster including those created by acts of political violence. By drawing on empirical evidence to distinguish between more and less universalizing forms of cosmopolitanism, this chapter indicates how cosmopolitan identity work in its many forms may offer important insight into world citizens’ ability to help mitigate the suffering of unknown and distant others.

References

- Anderson, R. (2014). *Human Suffering and the Quality of Life: Conceptualizing Stories and Statistics*. New York: Springer Books.
- Beck, U. (2000). The Cosmopolitan Perspective: Sociology of the Second Age of Modernity. *British Journal of Sociology*, 51(1), 79-105.
- Burdick, J. (1996). *Looking for God in Brazil*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Jameson, F. (1982). *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

- Jenkins, B. (2000). French political culture: homogenous or fragmented? In W. Kidd and S. Reynolds (Eds), *Contemporary French Cultural Studies* (pp. 111-126). New York: Oxford University Press Inc.
- Kleingeld, P., & Brown, E. (2011). Cosmopolitanism. In E. N. Zalta (Ed), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2011/entries/cosmopolitanism/>. Accessed June 3, 2013.
- Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project (2013). Brazil's Changing Religious Landscape. (July 18, 2013). <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/07/18/brazils-changing-religious-landscape/>. Accessed July 19, 2013.
- Robinson, L. (2009). Cultural Tropes and Discourse: Brazilians, French, and Americans Debate September 11, 2001. *The International Journal of Communication*, 3.
- Robinson, L. (2008). The Moral Accounting of Terrorism: Competing Interpretations of September 11, 2001. *Qualitative Sociology*, 31(3), 271-285.
- Robinson, L. (2005). Debating the Events of September 11th: Discursive and Interactional Dynamics in Three Online Fora. *The Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 10(4).
- Vucetic, S. (2011). *The Anglosphere: A Genealogy of a Racialized Identity in International Relations*. Stanford: Stanford Univ