

# THE PLACE OF CULTURE(S) REVISITED

## Reading Konrad Köstlin

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What marked European ethnology in Croatia during the 1990s, in which my generation of ethnologists graduated, was a certain disciplinary identity crisis and a prevalent feeling of frustration. Many of us felt as if we were somehow caught in between theory and practice. Such a situation was in line with global tendencies within humanities and social sciences and can partly be understood as an echo of poststructuralist critique of classificatory systems, singular meanings and absolute truths. It was a time when the linguistic turn was strongly felt in the humanities and the seemingly solid grounds of ethnological and folklorist knowledge-making and mapping of cultures were thoroughly debunked through critical analyses of the discursive construction of social phenomena and processes. On the other hand, the specific political and social context in Croatia in the early 1990s, the break-up of Yugoslavia and the wars that ensued, the declaration of Croatia's independence and the country's transition from socialism, undoubtedly left a strong mark on research interests and approaches among Croatian ethnologists and folklorists in that period. Images of the Croatian state, culture and traditions were constructed anew, as an indisputable value. Ethnologists were expected, and invited, to contribute to the discovery and reinterpretation of the Croatian heritage, which made them balance between the imperative to preserve, present and construct heritage on the one hand and their aptitude to critically observe the phenomena on the other. Analyses of ethnic and national identification processes, studies of safeguard-

ing and preservation of war-threatened cultural heritage, war ethnography, texts on forced migrations and Croatian diaspora proliferated at that time.

In academic circles, there was an intensive debate about the hierarchy of disciplinary knowledge production, about the limitations of the focus on folk culture as an object of study and, of the way it had been approached in the study programme we had just finished. At the same time, museums, conservation and restoration departments and other heritage institutions were amongst the most common employers of ethnologists. Policymakers expected us to deliver our expertise on culture no matter how constructed it was. What I myself encountered in my work as a museum curator were concrete objects waiting for me to document, classify, preserve, analyse, problematise and contextualise and finally to be put on display. Among people who visited cultural institutions these museological objects mattered for various reasons. They were ready to share their narrations about those objects with me, willing to see them as segments of a museum exhibition, or eager to record the material as a shot in a cultural-tourism promotional video with the intention of displaying the beauty and diversity of the region and the country.

*Ethnologia Europaea* pointed to the dilemmas and potentials of ethnological research at the turn of the twenty-first century with articles that discussed the materiality that people experience through their bodies and all their senses, ways of being in the lived world, practices of everyday life, space and the crea-

tion of its borders, the contemporary life of traditional culture and so on. Those contributions clearly indicated that in-depth ethnological studies of the dynamics of culture, observed simultaneously as a social construct and reality, as Konrad Köstlin (1981) once formulated it, are greatly needed in a changing world. And that is where Köstlin's article on "Vanishing Borders and the Rise of Culture(s)" (*Ethnologia Europaea* vol. 29:2, 1999) comes into play for me. Although having fully acquired the conceptual and methodological shifts in relation to poststructuralism and deconstructivism, the author shows that we cannot pronounce "the death of the subject" of ethnological and folklorist inquiry. He insists that we cannot turn a blind eye to the contemporary "stress on culture", that is, to the omnipresent tendency of evoking, using and (re)constructing culture, including components of folk culture, by different agents and for various purposes.

His text begins with a prologue that draws the reader's attention to traits of folk culture that have been treated in earlier ethnographic texts as monuments of "the rural way of life", but which also function as landmarks in our discipline's past due to their long-term central status in ethnological and folklorist research. He vividly describes elements of rural architecture in Lower Austria, in particular the phenomenon of *Kellergassen* (lanes with wine cellars), as well as the practices, divisions, perceptions and worldviews connected to them. However, Köstlin approaches these spaces and social lives from a different angle in comparison with his ethnological predecessors. His refreshing view of the everyday life of wine-producers focuses on the present "power of what is called culture" (p. 36): on the production of difference as identity by means of folk culture and on the creation of distinctive local, regional, and European cultural spaces. Previous ethnological classifications and mappings of folk culture had contributed significantly to that political project, he notes, by spotting distinctive features and delineating boundaries between different culture zones.

What Köstlin lays out before us in his text are the mechanisms by which a symbolic geography is imagined and implemented in a world where political

borders had been opened and the walls and wires removed – at least temporarily and at least in the part of Europe from which he writes. At the same instance, some new boundaries, not less concrete, are activated on the basis of pools of cultural differences, imagological representations of regions and stereotypes about "us" and "them". People seem to need and like borders, Köstlin concludes, because such schemes and limitations provide them with a sense of continuity and certainty in a world where political frontiers have allegedly vanished and long-established orders have been contested (p. 33). Borders, albeit cultural ones, are also the imperative of politics, which needs a territory to govern. In this way, narratives about cultural "unity and diversity", integrated in the foundations of folklore studies, also represent formative myths for the creation of regions.

For Köstlin, regions emerge at the intersection of human intersubjectivities, cultural and spatial potentialities and actualities. Fashioning cultural areas is explained as one of the main current trends in the making of places: places where we are and places where we want to be. In order to define cultural difference as identity and anchor it to space, regional borders have been revitalised, but also broadened and made more flexible. For many people, their position within a region functions as a claim of their rightful participation in the new order of things and as a strategy of joining a "Europe of regions" (p. 31). Regional identification dimension has thus become one of the ways in which people argue for their belonging to Europe. Criteria for the construction of regional difference largely rely on what they want to break away from, which layers of their pasts they want to forget. This was especially the case in Croatia in the period preceding the country's accession to the European Union in 2013. Belonging to Central Europe (*Mittleuropa*) and the Mediterranean – the regions used by Köstlin as showcases of the way in which the borders of cultural areas are (re)defined – has been declared by cultural policymakers as a desirable identity strategy in Croatia, as well as an undisputable fact. The analysis of cultural-touristic, academic, political and popular discourses, but also of everyday practices, provides us with an under-

standing of why it is important for people to be Central European (mostly in the case of the continental part of Croatia) or Mediterranean (among people living in Croatia's coastal part). These regions have gained prominence as markers of Croatian political and economic dispositions housed within the framework of the EU. However, the assigning of Croatia to these cultural regions is not only the claim where its inhabitants see themselves in the future, a mechanism of the country's Europeanization. It is also Croatians' attempt to distance themselves from others – primarily from the association with the former Yugoslavia and the imagined Balkans (cf. Todorova 2009).

The inclination to swear new allegiances, establish cultural regions, and turn them into tangible realities was visible in all spheres of Croatian society. In that context, to me as an ethnologist, Köstlin's article served as a clear call for action, urging me to analyse processes that were affecting my life and my self-perception, as well as lives and perceptions of others around me. I actually contributed to these processes as a professional often asked by media to explain the presence of cultural traits that were considered proof of our country's age-old belonging to pro-European regions. So Köstlin's urging to observe "regions while they are under construction", to "read their instruction manuals", to "discuss their selection of mostly historical artefacts as signifiers and see the results" (p. 32) resonated strongly with my work, especially in studies oriented towards the production of Mediterranean heritage and its usage in nation-building processes in Croatia. The approach he proposes deals with Europe both as a cultural construction and a reality felt under one's feet. "Europe as a Cultural Construction and Reality" is actually the title of *Ethnologia Europaea's* special issue published in 1999 and reprinted in 2001. The contributions comprised in this issue, including Köstlin's article, served as a response to the fast-changing political, economic and social circumstances, which bring forth new symbolic geographies, but also as a recognition that European ethnology should play one of the central roles in researching and generating insights in those processes.

Although published some seventeen years ago, the topics, research questions and approaches to region-making processes as proposed in Köstlin's text still represent a source of inspiration for researchers who tackle the issues of regional identity, place-making, and spatiality. For instance, in 2014 an anthology entitled *Drawing the Boundaries Again: Transformations of Identities and Redefinitions of Cultural Regions in New Political Circumstances* was published as a joint venture between the Croatian and Slovene Ethnological Societies. The topics discussed in the book – the redefining of borders and shifts of mental geographies in the context of ascension to the EU, the materialisation and musealisation of markers of a new identity, the role of ethnology in the locality/region/nation-building processes – indicate that Köstlin's discussions on replacing or strengthening state borders with cultural boundaries are still current today.

Köstlin also argues that not only regions, but also smaller localities, concrete places and homes are spaces that grow in importance in the course of the blurring of national borders. That is to say: the significance of locations is not diminished under the influence of globalisation processes. On the contrary, a renewed interest in local "roots", cultures, and specific features is considered to be a direct outcome of taking a share in worldwide activities. People make a conscious effort, the author states, "to ground their existence locally, despite the fact that they live, act and consume globally" (p. 34). Another related pair that Köstlin views through a similar prism is mobility and the local. These categories are seen as two sides of the same coin, each offering an insight into complex and fluid existences of contemporary citizens of the world, where taking part in both local and transnational communities is not seen as a contradiction. A declared risk of unification, the author believes, actually unleashes the processes of pluralization and searching for distinction. The diversity Köstlin talks about in this context is understood as a source of European strength and richness.

But at what point does the cultural or regional differences become too different? When does it, instead of representing a well of diversity, multicultural-

ism, and cosmopolitanism, start to be perceived as a threat to the European way of life, values, economy? Does the difference need to have a European origin, or at least a European-like air attributed to it, in order to be tolerated and accepted? In which cases does the appearance of migrating Others who are conceived of as different in respect to their cultures, religions, political attitudes, and lifestyles provoke the “defence” of borders? The political and social circumstances have changed significantly from the time when Konrad Köstlin pointed to the vanishing of borders in Europe. Recently, as a response to the so-called migrant crisis, Europeans have witnessed the reintroduction of national frontiers, the building of new walls, the keeping out of trespassers by barbed wire. However, this re-establishing of old political lines and the search for old certainties does

not bring into question Köstlin’s main arguments. Indeed, they only shed a new light on the relationship between the significance of political borders and the rise of culture or cultures deemed appropriate within them.

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