

## On the Concept of Cultural Fixation

IN A LITTLE BOOK ON CULTURAL BOUNDARIES and cultural provinces in Sweden, Sigurd Erixon wrote about certain Swedish districts whose culture had a conservative character: "The question is not so much one of greater primitiveness, but of a *fixation* (author's italics) of an earlier period of high prosperity, a reflex of a past period of greatness."<sup>1</sup> The word "cultural fixation" was first used by Erixon in print two years later, but it is certainly this concept he had in mind in 1945. The implications of the term are made clear from the examples. Erixon speaks of the cultural aspects of buildings and household furnishings and of a "many sided artistic skill in handicrafts", of "the flowering of culture" and of "a past period of greatness". This left an aftermath when the period of high prosperity was over, but as Erixon explicitly emphasised in the quotation above, the question is certainly not one "of greater primitiveness".

Walter Hävernicks in Hamburg must get the credit, from the Swedish viewpoint, of generously spreading knowledge of Swedish research in his yearbook, "Beiträge zur deutschen Volks- und Altertumskunde". In the 1970 issue, a section on "Periods of High Prosperity and Cultural Fixation" was included, under the collective heading "Particular Problems of historical Ethnology". In his synopsis (p. 14), Hävernicks writes: "The concept of "cultural fixation" that he (Sigurd Erixon) evolved as a label for the fossilisation of forms as a result of economic depression is applicable only in the field of work techniques and the preparation of material. But the concept cannot be used in any way to explain the persistence of old fashions in the sphere of 'folk costume' and 'folk art'." *But it is precisely in relation to such things Sigurd Erixon used the concept of cultural fixation.*

In *Ethnologia Europaea II*, (1968—69, the first part of Sigurd Erixon's In Memoriam volumes), I published an article, written in 1967, on "Sigurd Erixon as an investigator of folk art", and said in a deliberately controversial note (p. 27) that I consider "cultural fixation" to be an adequate designation for "the different reflections in local styles of a not inconsiderable part of a former period of cultural vigour". I have also used the term to head the chapter on this subject in my manual, "Introduktion till Folkklivsforskningen" (first edition Stockholm 1966; a German edition is in preparation), which deals inter alia with the survival in popular culture of Renaissance and Baroque styles in dress and furniture — that is to say, with phenomena for which, according to Hävernicks's statement, the term "cultural fixation" had no relevance.

These contradictory statements have led me to accept an invitation from the editor of this journal to explain my view of the import and application of this debated concept of cultural fixation.

In 1964, Walter Hävernicks organised a discussion on this topic in Hamburg, with Anna-Maja Nylén from Stockholm as lecturer. A report of the different contributions was published the following year in „Beiträge“<sup>3</sup>. The discussion

1. Sigurd Erixon, Svenska kulturgränser och kulturprovinser, Stockholm 1945, p. 31.

2. Sigurd Erixon, Svensk byggnadskultur, Stockholm 1947, p. 14.

3. Anna-Maja Nylén & Walter Hävernicks, „Kulturfixierung“ und „Innovation“. In: *Beiträge zur deutschen Volks- und Altertumskunde* 9 (1965). — In the report (p. 17) there has been a

showed that Sigurd Erixon's term "cultural fixation" had changed meaning over the years. What also increased the confusion was the fact that in 1937, in an article in English on corner-timbering in relation to the survival of earlier techniques, Erixon used the expression "ethnographical fixation". According to Hävernicks's report, A.-M. Nylén took this term as synonymous with "cultural fixation"<sup>4</sup>. It is evidently this interpretation and the application of the term in this context to one single phenomenon of a technical nature that led her to the view that "Erixon's 'cultural fixation' can to some extent be regarded as a Swedish variant of 'relic', 'survival'." But is this conclusion accurate? Already in his early works, like the large book on furniture<sup>5</sup> published in 1925, Erixon had been discussing the phenomena for which he later took 'cultural fixation' as a suitable name. On the other hand, his statement of 1937 is undeniably contradictory. How is it to be interpreted?

The criticism arising from the Hamburg discussion had the good effect of inducing Sigurd Erixon to give his own comments on the problem. He did so at a lecture in Stockholm, published with a German resume in *Folk Liv* 1966<sup>6</sup>. Here he admitted: "It is correct that I spoke for the first time about 'ethnographical fixation', in 'Folk Liv' 1937, but that was an inaccurate translation and I meant something different." He exemplified what he meant by "cultural fixation" by referring to his investigation of different parishes in Hälsingland, where a succession of fashions came into dominance at different periods and left their imprint on these regions for long afterwards. Erixon wrote: "My argument is based above all on the forms of roofs and walls as well as furniture painting, the work of silver smiths, architectural details and ornamentation, which lived on at a later date. Professor Hävernick is mistaken in thinking that I was referring to a general ethnographic fixation. For me, ethnology or 'Volkskunde' is concerned with the life of people in general and especially with that part of it which we call culture, and which, when we speak of cultural fixation, is for the most part confined to the more aesthetic elements of material culture and to what is concerned with social status."

It is, therefore, quite clear that Erixon's use of the term 'cultural fixation' was in diametrical opposition to Hävernicks's statement that it could only be applied "in the field of work techniques and the preparation of material". Underlying this latter view there may be a mistaken conception of the nature of the period of decline or depression that produced the kind of situation to which the name 'cultural fixation' could reasonably be given. When Hävernicks wrote "we have long known that areas of pronounced poverty do not preserve the old cultural forms at all", the areas where cultural fixation actually took place do not really

confusion between my own researches and those of my Lund colleague, the cultural geographer, Torsten Hägerstrand. It was the latter who wrote about the postal giro, car, and telephone in his epoch-making doctoral study: *Innovationsförloppet ur korologisk synpunkt*, Lund 1953; T. Hägerstrand, *Innovation Diffusion as a Spatial Process*, Chicago—London 1967.

4. see note 3, p. 8 ff.

5. Sigurd Erixon, *Möbler och heminredning i svenska bygder 1*, Stockholm 1925, p. VII.

6. Sigurd Erixon, *Termen „kulturfixering“ och dess användbarhet*. In: *Folk-Liv* 30, 1966 (printed 1967), p. 16 ff.

come into the question. Such areas have indeed undergone a decline because of economic changes, but they have not become 'areas of poverty' as a result.

AFTER THIS POLEMICAL INTRODUCTION, I shall proceed to outline some concrete examples of cultural fixation. If one talks of waves of culture which wash over a district, then the period of high prosperity is represented by the crests, and cultural fixation — should it occur — by the slowly subsiding waves. But if the waves come up too quickly, there is no aftermath of fixation. This was the case with the periods of high prosperity — with international analogies — that Sweden experienced in the 1850s and 1870s.

To establish that an increase in the supply of finance is expressed by an increase in consumption and a higher standard of living is no more than to state the obvious. Nor is it anything new to establish that money likewise had consequences for the old culture of the people, though less attention is paid to this. But when the same kinds of changes appear contemporaneously within the popular culture in widely separated directions, then one may reasonably wonder if an increased supply of money might not be the common factor. In a lecture delivered in 1959 on periods of high prosperity and folk culture, which was in part accepted, and in part strongly refused by Hävernäck in his 1970 contribution, I assembled data about some periods of high prosperity in Scandinavia ("Saga och Sed" 1958). These happened, however, to exemplify their *direct* results, and provided arguments for the intensified investigation of the period (1870s), to which the recollections of old people could still extend. At the same time, I maintained that the effort to eliminate class boundaries played a great part in the social background for the acceptance of novelties, and that luxury in clothes, vehicles, houses and furniture was a form of self advancement in past times, as it is now. But the purpose of the lecture was not to analyse more precisely the expressions and origins of cultural fixation. However, I shall revert below to some of the examples I gave then.

That technical improvements would remain, where circumstances were appropriate, is quite evident, and for this generally valid phenomenon, no special term is required. But what can be noted in this connection is that the style and fashion of a certain period, having taken root in an area during a period of high prosperity, can survive there for centuries. And this in spite of an awareness that the times had sloughed their skin, and in spite of the partial regaining of economic resources sufficient to keep up again with the turning wheel of fashion. This is what can be called cultural fixation. It does not hold good for any special group of objects, without a chain of accompanying circumstances.

In addition to his own studies, Sigurd Erixon has also exemplified cultural fixation from the doctoral theses of Phebe Fjellström and myself, on Lappish silver and the dress of the people of Skåne respectively.<sup>7</sup> In Skåne, Renaissance traditions in dress and silver jewelry survived into the nineteenth century. The

7. see note 6, p. 20. — Sigfrid Svensson, *Skånes folkdräkter*, Stockholm 1935; Phebe Fjellström, *Lapskt silver*, Uppsala 1962.

Renaissance forms originated in the period of high prosperity in the second half of the sixteenth century, and survived the period of decline caused by the ravages of war and the conquest by Sweden in the following centuries. I have expressed it in this way, that the farming folk of Skåne had neither psychological or economic incentives to keep up with changes in fashion. But that the times grew worse, did not mean continuing poverty after the worst misfortunes were over. The very fact that the older forms survived means that the wearing of jewelry can never have stopped. But there has been a retardation of development, and then taste, custom and surely also prestige, helped to maintain the old forms at least in their leading features. The same is true of furniture forms and wood carving. On the other hand, the kind of "death-like rigidity" (Totenstarre) in which Hävernicks believes involves no cultural fixation. Small changes are made by tailors, jainers, goldsmiths and others. The craftsmen could work away after the end of the period of high prosperity, unfettered by the demands of any leading style of fashion.

It was the same with the Lappish silver objects as with the dress-ornaments of Skåne. The Lapps had a period of economic prosperity in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the beginnings of which go back to the end of the Middle Ages. Phebe Fjellström wrote: "The affluence experienced then by the Lappish cultural area and the stylistic influences which took a hold, left their traces for centuries afterwards within this milieu. This appears to me to be a classical example of cultural fixation, where people were unwilling to give up the style and standard attained during a past period of prosperity".<sup>8</sup> The continuing significance of silver objects amongst the Lapps is, of course, conditioned by the fact that they constituted the most convenient means of disposing of wealth amongst a nomad people. But it is not for this reason that the older style forms have lived on, and that they did so is an example of cultural fixation. Its origin is due to economic considerations, but its continuance is due more to psychological and social causes. A silver object made in the current fashion need not have to cost more than a similar one made in an antiquated way. There was, therefore, no question of poverty enforcing the acquisition of the latter.

THROUGHOUT GREAT AREAS OF SWEDEN, but most strongly in the central parts, the Baroque style provided the broad basis for the art of the people. After the end of the Thirty Years' War, industrial life flourished in the new Great Power, which in proportion to the past now experienced a succession of years of peace. War came again, but after peace was declared in 1720 the economic revival also came astonishingly quickly. The late Baroque was still in fashion. It survived till the end of the eighteenth century, with adaptations in form, as the fashionable style of the Swedish countryside. In this case too, it is possible to speak of a cultural fixation, corresponding to what the Renaissance signified in the most southerly parts of the country.

The opposition in popular art between the Renaissance and the Baroque, as a result of changing economic conditions, can also be observed outside Sweden.

8. Fjellström 1962 (s. note 7), p. 13.

Renaissance traits lasted long in western Norway in home furnishings and popular art. These regions experienced a period of prosperity already at the beginning of the seventeenth century, as a result of widespread sales of timber in Western Europe. But afterwards, when the forests were worked out, the centre of the timber trade moved eastwards to the Norwegian valleys that run down towards Oslo Fjord, especially Gudbrandsdal. That was at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Through this, the Baroque and its favorite ornamental feature, the acanthus scroll, came to have such significance here, with echoes that run on till the present day.<sup>9</sup> This has of course also involved an element of "protection from innovation". But on the other hand, Hävernicks statement in this connection, that "in impoverished areas and during bad periods, the possessions of a range of social strata are nothing else than cheaper copies of those of the higher social levels" (1970, p. 10), lacks any actuality. Gudbrandsdal is definitely not an "impoverished area" and the "bad periods" are here only a relative concept.

Another example I gave in my lecture related to the Friesian area along the North Sea coast. It was said at the end of the sixteenth century, that more gold and silver could be found here than iron and brass, and that the costumes of East Friesland were so heavily decked with silver, that they could stand up by themselves<sup>10</sup>. The *raison d'être* for this comment lies in the region's natural wealth and in the period of high prosperity whose parallel effects in Skåne are referred to above. An adequate setting for the silver decked dresses was provided by the carved Renaissance interiors of the farms. In both North German museums, and also out in the countryside, the evidence for these conditions can still be seen. In fact, in my own study in Lund there happens to stand three chairs from Ostenfeld, dated to the 1850s, but with a form and carving of an amazingly pure Renaissance character. Renaissance forms in home furnishings as well as in the sphere of dress were maintained for a start as a result of the worsening economic situation. But their continued preservation was due to different factors: the prestige significance of the dress, the appropriateness of the wood engravings before the paintings in a room with an open hearth.

My final example is taken from an area, Vierlanden, which has been incorporated with Hamburg since the 1860s, and which also came into the discussion in 1964. This area is particularly well-known through the excellent study given to Vierlanden's marquetry-work in 1965 by Ulrich Bauche, under Professor Hävernicks auspices<sup>11</sup>. At the discussion Hävernicks pointed out: "If understood precisely, the concept 'cultural fixation' must signify, that an *entire* (author's italics) culture remains fossilised." Bauche stated in answer (p. 17) that the special conditions of life in Vierlanden "had not, indeed, preserved a whole compact culture, but, simultaneously, several quite different traces of such (carpentry techniques, ornament, furniture forms)." Hävernicks claim was absurd; it is remarkable

9. Robert Kloster, *Vestnorsk bygdekunst*. In: *Bergens Museums Årbok* 1937. — Reprint: *Norsk folkekunst*. In: *Nordisk folkekunst*, ed. by S. Svensson, Lund 1972, p. 90—110.

10. Hubert Stierling, *Der Silberschmuck der Nordseeküste*, Neumünster in Holstein 1935.

11. Ulrich Bauche: *Landtischler, Tischlerwerk und Intarsienkunst in den Vierlanden*, Hamburg 1965. Cf. Sigfrid Svensson, review in: *Rig* 1968, p. 105 ff.

enough that a series of cultural traits within an area have been stamped over a very long time by the impress of one and the same epoch. Bauche's book sets out clearly the development in Vierlanden. The agrarian depression of the seventeenth century first took effect in the last third of the century. With the decline in prosperity there developed a sharper dichotomy between town and country, and in Vierlanden one could not find the same degree of conformity as before with changing fashions. But this does not mean that time stood still (when does it ever do so!). Around 1740 there came a revival in Vierlanden's joinery production. Through the pressure of demand from the town carpenters' guild it became a matter of practical interest to emphasise the individual character of the carpenter's own wares. Marquetry-work also exhibits great variation. But even if it was the Rokoko that gave new life to Vierlanden's marquetry, nevertheless the Renaissance motif lived on both in the decoration and the furniture forms. Proximity to Hamburg made Vierlanden quite the reverse of an isolated area. The economic and social conditions existed there for encouraging people to keep pace with the changing fashions of the time. But that did not happen. Vierlanden's deliberate emphasising of its special line in home furnishings was reflected in the area's particular line in dress. The marquetry motifs were also adopted for other materials: in smith-forged weather vanes, in knitted items of folk costume, in the decorations on wall plaster.

WHAT HAPPENED IN SKÅNE, LAPPLAND, NORWAY, EAST FRIESLAND AND VIERLANDEN, corresponds exactly with what in Swedish ethnological research is called cultural fixation. I have myself never had any liking for creating or availing myself of labels. They can often be rather blunt tools, but can still be convenient for facilitating communications within a branch of research. The concept of cultural fixation evolved by Sigurd Erixon seems to me to be the most suitable term for the phenomenon which is exemplified here, and is met in quite closely similar forms in different quarters.

The suggestion that cultural fixation should be "an ethnological law" (Hävernick 1970. p. 14) has not been accepted by anyone.<sup>12</sup> Rather, I am myself fully in agreement with the opponents at the discussion in Hamburg 1964, who held that one should in the first instance "work out the historical growth from every aspect of the earlier life of the people." But this demands that ethnologists concerned with investigations of local history should also pay attention to the problem of cultural fixation. Alongside the basic economic factors, the other influences that have worked together for the emergence of a cultural fixation can then be made clear.

(Translated by Alexander Fenton, Edinburgh)

12. Since this article was written I have become acquainted with Günter Wiegmann's pioneering and concise analysis, *Reliktgebiet und Kulturfixierung. Zu einigen Begriffen und Modellen der schwedischen Ethnologie und deutschen Volkskunde*. In: *Festschrift Matthias Zender*, Bd. 1, Bonn 1972. I find that our opinions on the concept of cultural fixation are wholly in agreement. Wiegmann also writes here: "It was never maintained that the cultural fixation hypothesis was an all-embracing theory that answered all the problems. It is precisely in this respect that it can be unequivocally differentiated from historical materialism. The only common factor is that both spring out of economic circumstances; it does not follow that on this basis cultural matters in general are to be explained" (p. 66).