

Belonging in Europe

Modern Identities in Minds and Places

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There is a main line in contemporary ethnological research which is inspired by sociological and social psychological theory concerning modernity and cultural identity. For a decade or so this has inspired analyses of how people construct an individual *self-identity* and a group *cultural identity* with a free relation to tradition and obligatory bonds. What appears particularly problematic about theories of modernity is that they tend to overemphasize people as interpreting and meaning-handling beings and do not take action and practice seriously enough. This leads to an understanding of cultural identity as the result of reflection (*reflexivity*) more than as the consequence of what people actually do. In many ways this view conceals the local and regional processes now taking place all around Europe. People's growing interest in *place* forces us to question several accepted truths about the excluding and xenophobic nature of the local. The local as it appears today seems to derive its force not just from globalization processes but also from its inviting "doability". The article ends by indicating possible directions for future studies, but it starts in a highly concrete fashion, with an example of how the habit of transforming people into cultural stereotypes – identities – has taken on the character of self-evident fact in today's turbulent Europe.

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In the middle of August last year I boarded a plane at Zagreb Pleso, after a lengthy period of fieldwork and a marvellous holiday on the coast. The man in the seat beside me on the SAS plane turned out to be a Norwegian from Stavanger working with the United Nations, and he was in the same talkative age group as myself. He was working with the reconstruction of Sarajevo, mainly in the field of economics. It's always nice to have someone to talk to on a long journey. We had a great deal in common – not least a love of Norway. Since I had been in Stavanger, he tried to help me to mentally localize his newly built, evidently lavish house. The attempt was unsuccessful, but we knew each other better after it.

My fieldwork was partly about understanding people's interpretation of space and region after a devastating war. I took the opportunity to continue my fieldwork up in the air. Parts of Bosnia have been more severely afflicted than

anywhere else in the old Yugoslavia, with destroyed villages and relocated populations. I seized the chance to hear what my neighbour had to say about the prospects of getting a normal business life going again. Without a livelihood, it is difficult for people to take root again.

"Well," said my neighbour thoughtfully, "It's actually a rich country with huge assets. The problem as I see it is not the economy, it's in here," he said tapping his forehead. "It's the way people think; it's in their history, traditions, and culture." And then he put forward the familiar idea of the Balkans as a scene of border disputes and small local wars ever since the days of the empires: Byzantine, Ottoman, Habsburg. I was immediately transformed from a fieldworker studying the former Yugoslavia to a researcher trying to understand the ideology of UN officials.

For this well-educated and knowledgeable

person, as for many others, cultural identity, tradition, and local customs were the explanation instead of what needed to be explained. Just as delighted as he was to speak about his native district, he energetically inscribed the Bosnians in their local culture.

It is commonplace nowadays to explain everyday behaviour with reference to origin, place, and history. The war in the former Yugoslavia, probably more than any other single event, has made Europe believe in identity as an explanatory factor for major political processes. Serbs, Croats, and Bosnians – and now recently Kosovars – fight out of tradition and old habit.

It was in fact a series of actions – primarily carried out by those who had the political power in the 1990s – that provoked both ethnic conflict and local killing, but this was not suggested as a plausible cause. The explanation ignored the fact that the main victims were the civilian population who were the bearers of these supposed traditions.

In the European conceptual world, the inhabitants of the country have been “Balkanized”. The famous “Orientalism” that has long separated Europe from the East has exoticized and separated a part of Europe as a distinct alien species. Abuse of power has been draped in a cultural veil and legitimized in terms of a cultural heritage. History has been deliberately abused and mythologized for political purposes (cf. Povrzanović 2000; Meštrović 1994).

Identity as Folk Belief

If we look around today's Europe, we see how culture and tradition have become increasingly important when people try to understand each other and themselves. What has happened in the Balkans took place in a time of newly aroused love of the national, the regional, and the local. The boom now being enjoyed by the national, for instance, in Norway and elsewhere, is without parallel since the turn of the century. That was when citizenship and patriotic values were in focus. Nationalism was part of a democratization process, with a strong emancipatory streak. What we see today is a popular and committed enthusiasm for one's own cultural identity. Citizenship has moved to

the sidelines, to be replaced by the nation as the frame around cultural belonging (Ehn, Frykman & Löfgren 1993).¹ The cultural heritage is aestheticized, local features are consciously designed, and the cultural identity of individuals is articulated in costumes and symbols. There are more *bunader* “folk costumes” in Norwegian homes now than there were in the nineteenth century. People today are energetically engaged in culture-building, choosing from the past to create an attractive self-portrait – usually with a strong local connection.

We can trace this process back to the 1980s' *politics of identities*, to the cultural and ethnic complexity of the European states, and thus to the need that people feel for a distinctive profile of their own, for something to hold them together in an uncertain world. At any rate, *belonging* has become a folk concept, having assumed the taken-for-granted character of folk belief. People today study ancestors, relatives, and geographical origin, as if it really matters where you come from. They also look for their true selves via the genes, and using the body as a tool (Lundin 1997; Lundin & Åkesson 1996).

With a sweeping generalization one could say that what is happening in today's Europe is that *people understand themselves genealogically* and that they are interpreted by others in genealogical terms. This means that, in the midst of late modernity, one understands one's own time and its actors by looking back – not forward, as has otherwise been the hallmark of the twentieth century and modern society. “History must indeed give way to poetry, time to space”, as David Harvey points out (1989:215).

Is it possible for us ethnologists to view this process as an expression of anything other than that people are searching for an identity – the automatic explanation in present-day research on modernity and identity?² Can the attention devoted to place and belonging be understood from other angles than those based on subject theory and philosophical idealism? That is to say, the view that people, if they are to understand the world, must first be reflexive in relation to themselves, construct a self-identity to understand their place in existence. Would it not be equally possible to interpret this attention phenomenologically, as an expression show-

ing that places have been opened as rewarding arenas for people's actions; that places are events more than demarcated areas? The local world in which we live is also the one where we get to know ourselves through our actions, not the other way around (cf. Casey 1996; Merleau-Ponty 1969).

Before I try to link the process to many of today's accepted theories of modernity, cultural identity, and self-identity, I want to look at some aspects of this genealogical understanding that is spreading in Europe nowadays. It may clarify things for a moment to defend oneself against the conspiratorial perspective.

The local that we see aestheticized and proclaimed from the Bosphorus to the Arctic Circle has become important because there are powerful forces imposing the local on people. The genealogical outlook that ranges from ancestors to biological heritage is far from being a result of free choice, the successes of museum curators, the historians' obsession with the cultural heritage, or the advances of bioscience. On the contrary, we see here the impact of macropolitical processes by which groups and individuals are inscribed in feudal and local structures. One of them is the new regionalism.

Regionalism

As an ethnologist one cultivates a special love for processes that originate in everyday life. We like to see people as rational and calculating actors. This "perspective from below" has in many ways been our true *raison d'être*, our distinctive position in the scholarly community. It gives us the gratifying opportunity to suggest surprising perspectives on familiar phenomena.

Regional politics have deep roots in the Scandinavian countries, where they have been pursued with great energy ever since the 1960s (cf. Hansen 1998). But it was not until the 1990s that this assumed the form of a *cultural* mobilization. The measures of economic and social support have always predominated.

What has happened is that the regions have been cultivated as places for cultural identification. They have grown up out of the European landscape, as rural places of a solid and diffe-

rent character, a clear expression of something to long for, giving the green valley a place on the geographical map. In addition, the region has attracted increasing attention on the political level. Now that the European Union is going to build the new Europe, the authorities have realized the difficulty of appealing to national belonging.

The painful "democratic deficit" of the EU is due to the fact that the union lacks a land, a territory, and thus finds it hard to make people's hearts beat faster. All democratic processes hitherto have proceeded from the nation state. No pedagogy is as effective as that of space, no lesson as easy to learn as the one embedded in "the stones where we as children played" (cf. Ehn, Frykman & Löfgren 1993). There may be those who are willing to die for their country, but not many want to die for the EU, as the powers in Brussels are realistic enough to know (cf. Shore in this volume). The geographical spaces that have been most successful in organizing emotions are nations. They have a head start of at least a hundred years. Their places on the map have been internalized as God-given units.

When the Nation and the Union are contrasted, the latter is perceived as a threat to the former – quite rightly. At different levels within the EU, we are therefore witnessing one of the most dramatic culture-building processes since the nationalization of Europe's geography ages ago. In their attempts to create a European cultural heritage, the cultural administration of the EU has chosen two lines. The first is to emphasize the intellectual traditions and events that unite the continent, something that people can identify with. Here they face the same dilemma as many nations encountered last century, and which Brit Berggreen (1989) summed up for Norway under the slogan: "Has nation, lacks culture".

The academic community is producing a steady flow of publications in philosophy, art, history of ideas, archaeology, and comparative religion. In the construction of this new but ancient European heritage, it is all too easy to invoke the high cultures. It is all about the Greeks and Romans, the Middle Ages and the Carolingian Empire, the Habsburgs and other

political precursors of today's EU. We are re-introduced to intellectuals, artists, musicians, authors, but this time as representatives of European traditions. It is an irony of history that those who were among the first to be successfully nationalized now emerge as representatives of European values and traditions. After a tug of war between Vienna and Bonn, Beethoven has now become a European by virtue of his "Ode to Joy" from the Ninth Symphony.

The production of this shared European cultural heritage – *From Plato to Nato* – has been a great amplifier for bourgeois culture, or, as Chris Shore (in this volume) has encapsulated the process, Leninism without Lenin. In other words, the leading strata are once again leading the masses, but this time without a leader.

The attention devoted to the regional, on the other hand, opens the door to the other successful recipe: creating political legitimacy by invoking a popular culture and opinion. This feat was accomplished more than a hundred years ago in most nations. The lack of popular support can thus be overcome by mobilizing region and place. Political aspirations thus coincide with current tendencies. From the Land of the Midnight Sun to the Mediterranean, regions are playing a growing cultural role, and of course an economic role. This does not only apply to the countries of the EU. Neither the Mediterranean, the Baltic, Arctic Europe, Central Europe, nor the Balkans are exclusively EU areas.

Transnational regions are organized differently from national ones. It is on the local, national level that cultural reworking, aestheticization, and ideologization can be done most successfully. The Scandinavian experience then is rather different from that of the continent. Whereas federal states such as Italy and Germany are articulated in a number of distinctive regions, in Scandinavia individual provinces such as Skåne in Sweden and Vestlandet in Norway are emerging in closer connection with the nation state.

But the difference is quantitative rather than qualitative. Each region is now creating an individual cultural image with its own dishes, its own folk culture, its own flag or anthem. More is being written today about the local

history and literary history of Skåne than ever before. Food from Skåne is a more loaded concept than it ever was in the days to which the tradition refers. An increasing number of food products are being sold today bearing "Skåne" as a seal of quality. The province has become something far more than a region, it has become a *site*, a place charged with meaning that does not necessarily have a geographic foundation (Salomonsson 1999). Skåne as a region creates its own history, its cartography, its communication network, and its culture, different from and at the same time closely integrated into the rest of Sweden (Idvall 1999).

For anyone familiar with the construction of nationality in the nineteenth century, there is a certain sense of *déjà vu* in the new regional Europe. The difference is that region-building does not attract leading intellectuals, the people who used to be the culture builders *par excellence*. Instead it is planners, entrepreneurs, local artists, and academics who are participating in the process – "the cultural mass" as Daniel Bell calls them (1976:20). Other intellectuals are keeping their distance because of the course dictated by career opportunities. A successful national or international career is not achieved via the regions. In each individual country, two separate systems seem to have developed, one that is more universalistic and one with strong regional roots. The regional is therefore rarely included in the serious criticism to which works of art, literature, and intellectual production are subject. At the local level there is more praise, less frowning, and greater freedom of action.

What makes regions suitable for incorporation in transnational culture building is that – almost without exception – they have acquired an image of being in opposition to national centres. They have become alterities within what are otherwise fairly homogeneous nations, examples of exceptionality and distinctiveness.

The journey from Zagreb concluded the year's fieldwork on how cultural regionalism has emerged in the province of Istria, within the new state of Croatia. Istrians claim that their province is very different from the nation. Croatia, like Norway, is based on the idea of

ethnic homogeneity. Since Croatia has quickly formulated a rather predictable cultural heritage and an easily recognizable national rhetoric, it is of course easy to distance oneself from Zagreb, from the demand for cultural conformity. People in Istria invoke their coastal location, the Mediterranean, their open, tolerant, multicultural, easy-going spirit.

In short, the regional is more in keeping with the times than the national. It is able to support the central values of late modernity and thus make the national seem like a relic of an older authoritarian society. In the many towns in the province where people have seen masters of varying nationality come and go, where the Croatian, Slovenian, Italian, and German languages have alternated, people speak warmly about Europe as the future, while Zagreb represents dictatorial and hidebound nationalism.

It is often maintained here that people's identity is not rooted in ethnic affiliation. The fact that one belongs to Croatia is less important than local competence and local connections. The local can contain so much that does not fit in the ethnic: languages and trends coexist without any of them claiming to be totalizing or exclusive. The place is generous and inclusive, it gives a sense of belonging by offering scope for action that is much broader than ethnic identity. We face here the paradox that the national becomes particular and coercive while the provincial becomes general and optional.

Similar processes that have become visible in Istria can be observed in Vestlandet in Norway, which defines itself in such strong contrast to Oslo and Østlandet, and I recognize it from Skåne in Sweden, which likewise resists the dominance of Stockholm, from Bavaria in Germany, Catalonia in Spain, Wales and Scotland in the UK, and so on.

What we are witnessing is thus a flaring of interest in the local, the place, which marks its difference from the centre. The cultural distinctiveness of the region would be unthinkable without the central backdrop. But the distinctive profile is more than just contrastive; it is also a result of the loss of influence by the nation state. In the Europe of the future, it will be less and less powerful in defining people's formal belonging.

This process thus has clear political causes and implications. In this respect, belonging is in a way an illustration that supranational structures today "interpellate" a local sense of belonging (cf. Højrup 1993). This process is not just occurring in the EU states. Similar building processes seem to be going on in several parts of the continent. Yet this tells us very little about why it is so welcome as an arena of action. The region, as we shall see, also contains a great potential for people's cultural articulations and enterprise.

The Horizons of Modernity

The effects of the growing interest in belonging have not really made themselves felt in the research community, in our ethnological interpretations and theories. Or to put it another way: they can only be partly explained on the basis of our analyses of identity, modernity, and breaking away.

What I see in ethnology when it comes to the relation to this neo-regionalism is two main tracks. The first, and perhaps the more dominant, is to maintain a wary critical and deconstructing stance. Regionalism is almost always legitimated in terms of the folk life that previous generations of ethnologists and local historians highlighted. The past is thus presented in "folklorized" form, and as such it too easily becomes confined to local patriotism. When history repeats itself, it does so as farce, as Marx would have said. As such it deserves censure and gives the research community good reason to stand alongside and lift a warning finger. Any hint of essentialism or cultural fundamentalism can and must be questioned. Intellectuals have to stand guard and do the necessary public cleansing.

This dissociation is a kind of academic gut reaction which I think most readers will recognize. We will gladly stand up for the cultural heritage – but not in this way! We are all in favour of preserving folk culture – but not as kitsch! In this there is also a powerful theoretical inspiration from the deconstructivism of the 1980s. The delight in dismantling the structures erected over any form of "culture" by past generations has been a necessary critique with-

in the discipline (Marcus & Fisher 1986).³

The other track followed by ethnologists in their understanding of the interest in belonging is inspired by theories of modernity. This means that we usually emphasize the creativity in the ongoing culture-building. I myself sympathize with viewing any form of culturalization, localization, and genealogical understanding as reflecting that people are free to control their own history, that they transform the past into a cultural heritage which they are willing to make their own. Tradition does not force itself on the individual; we are relatively free to create a heritage for ourselves, one which agrees better with today's desiderata, as David Lowenthal has shown (1985).

The need to create a cultural corset around something that threatens to dissolve is thus made easier by the fact that the past no longer commands, it invites. When familiar landmarks such as the nation, "society", the family, and ties to a place lose their significance, then everyone hastens to fill the vacuum with culture and imagined rootedness. So while formal citizenship is losing importance and it does not matter very much whether you are a Swede or a German, a Jew or a Greek, people will still be warmed by the idea that they have a cultural identity all the same.

The development of regional Europe hinted at above may perhaps show that the theories are of limited explanatory value. When all is said and done, the choice is not particularly free. What seems extra contradictory is that the theories of modernity leave so much scope for the individual culture builder. Within the theories it is easy to draw a line directly out from the individual level to the overall patterns.

What is more, the individual who stands out in the light of the theories is usually a being who *interprets* and *handles meaning* rather than one who acts. It is someone who chooses to compensate for the losses inflicted on him – and sometimes her – by modernity.

I shall try to clarify this dilemma: in the wake of the growing dominance of modernity theories in our discipline, it is well known that we now have an understanding of people in which the focus is increasingly on the individual, traditionless, placeless person. Instead of

the concept of *culture* that became a guiding star in the previous decade, we ethnologists spoke more about *identity*. This is a more mobile concept in the complex society in which people are constantly in change (Ehn & Löfgren 1996). Identity implies that people are interested in creating something personal of their own, which gives continuity and cohesion through time and place. We are more hesitant about using the collocations that aroused the idea of subcultures: coastal culture, bourgeois culture, children's culture, immigrant culture, or any other compound term that could suggest socially or locally based cultural patterns. Such concepts raise an external structure which means that people are inscribed in these patterns and are not their originators.

People in modernity are broken loose, *disembodied*, from spatial and temporal contexts, as we learn, for example, from Anthony Giddens (1990, 1991). Individuals and groups, in Thomas Ziehe's words, are *released* from tradition. They are given an opportunity to establish a self-identity, something personal and genuine. Release encourages creativity, stimulates people to use various props to stage and aestheticize themselves, Ziehe says. Many people are bent double by the demands that they should be themselves and enter contexts where the framework is already given; they make their way to ontological orders that existed before them, which are not influenced by them (Ziehe 1989). In both cases, the self-made or enforced style becomes attractive. Youth cultures, for example, are the order in a world where one has lost one's foothold in the local and the traditional.

The importance of being oneself – *authenticity* – is emphasized by Giddens as a social and cultural construction. He points out how people create contexts for themselves which mean that they can have an independent relation to what is locally given. They travel light. Their itinerary is at once free and carefully planned. They make themselves authentic by means of autobiography, rewriting their own history so that it will fit new contexts; they break free by training and disciplining the body; they put themselves on a diet with a strict nutritional regimen. Never before have people had such opportunity to design themselves and direct themselves as

successfully as they can today. Life has become an aesthetic project.

This designing is supposed to be personally borne, not locally fixed and thus determined by others. If it is bound in time and place, this is an expression of a choice that is perceived as personal. In every person's life there is a question that must be answered again and again: "Who am I?" (Melucci 1991).

The fact that precisely this question – "Who am I?" – is brought down to the individual level, that the answer cannot be sought in religion, evolution, or tradition, means that identity is dissolving, in constant movement and compulsive reformulation. Identity should not be seen as a noun; instead it becomes a verb – a check-point in an endless interpretation process.

The traditionally local stands for something solid and difficult to change. This makes it simultaneously attractive as a firm anchorage and threatening because of its permanence. It meets a need that we feel for security, giving us a chance to experience the sense of coherence that is otherwise denied us.

If we look at the local from this angle, we see that there is no real difference between this and the other sources of identification to which people turn in their quest for the answer. The countless models for identification – in newspapers, on television, on the silver screen, or in other media – fulfil the same duty. First people conceive an identity and then they try to realize it. "We weave from dreams" could be taken as a motto for understanding how important the models have become. The models reach down to the traditional local level and give the individual the courage to break loose. It may sound like a paradox, but both these models and the "culturally" local have come to be used for release from tradition.

For many scholars within cultural studies, television soap operas, rock music, and weekly magazines have become new fields in which to work. It is often said that this is where people find the figures they wish to emulate. In ethnology there is understandable hesitation about classical fieldwork, a certainty that, whatever people may say, it is just a personal reworking of what the media have already presented. This reminds me of one of the many similes in 1970s'

structuralism: "Why listen to different performances of Beethoven's Fifth when you can just as well read the score?" Within that tendency, practice was always perceived as a contextualized performance of a given structure, and not a creative act.

If I sum up the understanding offered by the theories, they provoke images of people as interpreting, reworking, and in the best sense reflecting beings. They are rational actors in the good Habermas tradition. The parts of culture that are prominent have to do with the pictorial, textual, cognitive, and emotional aspects.

What part of people's world risks ending up in the shadows? As we have seen, it is emphasized that people in their lives are motivated by a quest for identity. Belonging can easily become the *re-action* to life in a risk-fraught society. But do people not also search for action, for something to do? Can we not view identity as a consequence of what people *do* more than of what they *think*? Is all the searching and interpreting as decisive as the thirst for activity? The perspectives are not mutually exclusive, but the emphasis can easily be put in the wrong place.

This outlook readily leads one to overlook certain areas of culture. Those who embed it in a local and temporal context also hide it from the theories of modernity. What happens in working hours also becomes less interesting than what happens in leisure time. Today we know more and more about what young people do after the school bell has rung, more and more about what goes on "in town" and less and less about what happens in the home. A great deal disappears in the repetitive sequences and monotonous toil of everyday life.

The consequences of this, of course, can easily be that groups who do not distinguish themselves by being interpreting, reflecting, and global in their orientations end up outside the spotlight; activities that are not intended to create identity become less interesting to study. Researchers today know more and more about an increasingly narrow stratum of society: about young people, about the people who are visible in the light, about those who appear in the media. To travesty a famous quotation: "Never

before have so many known so much about so few."

In this context ethnology loses its orientation towards being a science that studies cultures, becoming one that studies certain popular cultures that arise under certain premises, not because these are some kind of pioneers or avant-garde, but because they are visible from the selected viewpoint. On top of this, somewhat unexpectedly, there is a diminishing interest in practice and action.

The study of identity and modernity in the 1990s has been absolutely necessary for breaking the rather stagnant picture previously painted of "culture" in its subcultural compound variants. It has focused on how important it is to understand people as culture builders, as actors once again, after a long time stuck in the study of supra-individual patterns. At the same time, however, something got lost on the way. By once again connecting with the local, it will perhaps be possible to counter the excess importance attached to people as meaning-handling beings and to concentrate on their actions. It should also be possible once again to capture culture, everything that goes on between people, such as relations, rituals, and games. In other words, rules that generate actions.

Identity is perhaps formed just as much in relations as by copying models, by work as much as by leisure, by games and rituals, by the rather tenacious patterns and surprising openings of everyday life just as much as by models and reflection. Identity, in short, is shaped through mimetic processes in which the actual motive of imitating perhaps remains concealed and even irrelevant.

If, moreover, the perspective leads us to ignore the political and economic factors that also intervene in everyday life, then this will scarcely enhance the breadth of the ethnological analysis.

With the Home as a Metaphor

The thirst for action, the creativity, and the aesthetic zeal that we can see in everyday life – the delight in the local – can be explained in many ways. The "release" afforded by modernity is one important component, but only one.

Above all there is a danger in viewing culture as compensatory, as a reaction to what is going on out there. This is an explanation with such a strong social psychological element that culture as a creative force is neglected. The compensatory explanation invites us to see how culture becomes a defence against the threat of insecurity. If people are busy working with their identity – as seems to be the case – they are impelled by their quest for the answer to the troublesome riddle: "Who am I?" Culture is thereby reduced to a question on the agenda for the individual's negotiation with the risk society.

Perhaps people's revived interest in place, tradition, and culture is not at all the answer to dissolution and release, not a result of free choice. Perhaps it is just as much a response to the fact that the local – for different reasons, some of them presented above – has also become a rewarding arena for action. Perhaps it is the opportunities that are opened for people that make them act, instead of the insecurity they feel about ongoing developments. At these revived local and regional places, it has become gratifying to perform a number of cultural articulations, games, and undertakings.

By focusing on action and play we can obtain an alternative – or a supplement – to the orientation to the subject in modernity theory, as the Danish cultural scholar Niels Kayser Nielsen (1997) believes. The perspective can make us aware of practical knowledge at the expense of well thought-out rationality, the temporary and the local at the expense of the whole, experience at the expense of theorizing, the ever-present alterity at the expense of the culturally given.

To put it another way: Is it perhaps an expression of the intellectuals' self-understanding that they believe that people are going around all the time wondering who they are? People are otherwise terribly busy inventing things, finding practical solutions – delighted in working, playing, and searching for what does not already exist.

It is possible, Kayser Nielsen goes on to say, that the strength of the local lies in the fact that it is not so much a space that is defined by its ideology but more by its physical feasibility. The national space, to take one example, is so per-

meated with the instructions and expectations of the public sphere that it can feel constricting. People are instead encouraged by the local; it has been liberated in various ways, it is more than ever before a relatively undefined, provisional arena for action, where one can test solutions that one has seen in other places, games that have taken place somewhere else. It is here one can experience an intoxicating sense of *being in the world* – not as a result of reflection and scientific analysis, but because one can constitute oneself through the tasks one is able to perform (Merleau-Ponty 1969:28). This is an arena where the unexpected can occur, where something old can be combined with something new, where one is so familiar with the local that one can discover what more is needed, what has the potential to renew and change (cf. Stewart 1996). The aestheticization that we see taking shape is perhaps as much a matter of separating and defining such a playing field, a stage in our very midst.

The American-Chinese geographer Yi-fu Tuan has compared the local to a home (1996). This simple metaphor has great development potential. Behind every home there are of course ideas about the family, there is a ready-made aesthetic – director's instructions that come from outside. The home is the place and the context in which one not only belongs but also – according to society's norms – should stay. The home is permeated by culture.

More than anything else, however, the home serves as the framework around an individual's dramatic performances. It gives meaning to many different activities. The sense of belonging is much less ideological than practical, based on each day's undertakings. Just as home and family naturally *are*, they also *happen*. Every day people test the rules, they challenge and change. Here they tackle the art of being parents, bringing up children, cooking food, cleaning, and entertaining guests, trying out what it is like to be oppositional as well as being compliant and uncontroversial.

That the home occurs so frequently in our literary and theatrical creations can be explained by the fact that its limited range of characters and easily comprehensible stage directions can give rise to so many potential

combinations and to such creativity. Is there any arena that is so simple and simultaneously so complex, so easy to identify with and use in one's own thinking? It is because homes, like other places, *happen*, that they lend themselves so well to dramatizing, whether this takes the form of narrative or history, as Edward Casey (1996:27) says.

Perhaps the great vitality shown by the family and the home throughout history should therefore be understood as a result of the fact that it is such an accessible arena for action, transgression, and the countless surprises of everyday life. Here one is permitted to make mistakes in rehearsals, before performing on the public stage. Presumably we can also understand the great toil expended on the aestheticization of the home as a form of stage directions – set-pieces that are moved around so that the play can be continued and renewed – more than as an expression of people ordering their homes to create identity. It is, quite simply, fun to design the home, and it is incredibly creative; it generates actions more than it expresses a personal longing for identity. Perhaps identity comes, so to speak, into the bargain.

The great advantage of this perspective on the local is that it gives us an understanding of how the place is not the opposite of the global, the modern, or the medial, but instead the space where all this is tested in practice, reshaped, made accessible. This is possible because the actors here know the space and know each other. In the local, people are concretely present, body and soul, they are subjected to the same impressions and they see similar limitations. Here the opportunities for coordinated action become possible because of the frame of reference that is already there, and because people are forced to realize that they are close to each other, in some way resemble each other. Something dynamic and changeable takes place here, something that is rooted in action more than in interpretation, in everyday life rather than in dreams, in tactile and emotional sensations more than in abstraction. The local offers a style, a theme, a thread that binds processes, people, and memories together, what could be called – with an overused word – culture. Or, as Edward Casey writes: "Given that culture man-

ifestly exists, it must exist somewhere, and it exists more concretely and completely in places than in minds or signs" (1996:33).

The answer to the question why the local has become culturally productive can thus also contain transgression and transcendence, the unexpected and the suddenly possible. It is here that we can, for a moment, hold all that is familiar at arm's length and be amazed at its versatility and malleability. Reflection, according to Merleau-Ponty, therefore does not have the meaning we normally ascribe to it – retiring from the world to ponder it – but means taking a step backwards "to see the transcendences breaking through, a dissolution of the intentional bonds that tie us to the world." Only thus can it show itself as it is – capable of being influenced. "Reflection reveals the world as alien and paradoxical" (1969:31). On the local level, people are constantly forced to take and rework everything that questions any conception of a coherent world, all beliefs of an explanatory *master narrative*. Things, dramatic human destinies, charged places, out-of-the-ordinary events force people to relativize, to take a step back and reflect. In the local, cultural patterns are at once confirmed and dramatically challenged; a longing for something else is born here, for something that transcends what already exists (cf. Stewart 1996:138f.). Everything becomes so much more feasible, untidier, and more unpredictable at that level.

It is possible that we find here a viable interpretation of why the local and regional have become so important. It is possible that such simple political processes as the creation of regions and localities, whether from a national level, by EU bureaucrats, or through globalization, has made it possible to bring the many games and ideas back home to one's own familiar arena.

It occurs to me that ethnology, with its tradition of being able to analyse culture in the sense of action, rules, rituals, and material culture, with its delight in doing ethnography and digging down into a situated practice, should be able to supplement the understanding produced by neighbouring disciplines. Ethnology, with its skill in adopting the emic perspective, should be able to create an understanding of why people

find it so doable, so rewarding to tackle the local.

The way to a deeper understanding of this kind probably goes through both cultural analysis and modernity theory – not bypassing them. The theories of modernity have made ethnology pay attention to innovation and transcendence, culturally productive and chance factors; how release leads to creativity. But they have overemphasized the reflexive and subject-oriented nature of the process. Cultural analysis has spoken about the forms in which the process is clad and shown the strength of the models, but it has found it difficult to incorporate the perspective of action. It speaks more about the frames that are set up for understanding than about those for action. The way to the place also seems to go via knowledge of general, structural processes, forces that redefine the local and open unusual paths of action – not in romantic hopes about how great things start in the small and the local, but that the local, in certain circumstances, becomes a land where new discoveries can be made.

The focus on action gives room for curiosity about the many reworkings that take place locally, their conditions and constantly occurring transcendences. We are slowly approaching once again a time when the local becomes crucial part of ethnological fieldwork.

Perhaps it can also make us see that what violence does and war creates is the destruction of the playground and the diversity. War monopolizes the manoeuvring space, violates the place, makes identities, history, and memories uniform. Violence and mythologization run side by side, hand in hand, to portray existence as simple and stereotyped. There are actions that quench all possibility of transcendence, surprises, and awareness of living under an open sky. In this light, using the war in the former Yugoslavia as a justification for paying attention to cultural identities is nothing but putting the cart before the horse. Hopefully, the energy of my fellow passenger and his United Nations colleagues will be devoted to restoring the playgrounds and arenas, rather than to changing people's mentality and traditions.

Translation: Alan Crozier

Notes

1. On the local level, people have fairly free control over national symbolism. It has become one of many letterboxes used by local people to arouse the attention of central politicians (Frykman 1996).
2. These theories are being mulled over in several ongoing dissertations by ethnologists at Bergen University – by Connie Reksten Kapstad who is writing about the environment and politics, Heidi Richardson in her works on modern eco-farmers, Kirsti Hjemdahl Mathiesen on today's theme parks – and among many ethnology majors. The inspiration has often come from phenomenology, which has been able to put a series of provocative questions to modernity theories and Cultural Studies. Above all, they have discussed how these have proved excellent for understanding culture as different forms of texts and interpretations, but very little as action and situated practice.
3. In the wake of the scientific reflexivity that followed *Writing Culture*, the deconstruction of earlier cultural units has also become a favourite sport in our science. The art of deconstructing the national, the local, or the socially bound has been practised as a form of necessary and useful source criticism, which has sometimes closed people's eyes to the creativity and the surprises that are also contained within the framework of cultural constructions (cf. Casey 1996).

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