

# Vanishing Borders and the Rise of Culture(s)

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The article analyses some emerging new functions of "local cultures" and new meanings of so-called "national cultures" in contemporary public discourses. In recent years, we have witnessed the disappearance of old certainties, as the previously-fixed boundaries defining nations and states have become more ambiguous; meanwhile, new cultural frontiers have been erected around other territorial spaces. The argument advanced in this paper mainly in relation to spatiality and local cultures could be extended to values, morals, religion, etc. This is not the return of romantic nineteenth-century ideas; rather, it is suggested here that this phenomenon draws upon the work of folklorists and ethnologists, whose descriptions and mapping of folk cultures is taken as scientific evidence of distinctive local and regional differences.

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## Prologue

One of the areas in the province of Lower Austria near the city of Vienna is called *Weinviertel*. Cellars dug in the ground and ranged in rows side by side form the so-called *Kellergassen*, which are narrow passages with cellars on both sides with a little building at the entrance. These small subterranean rooms containing wine presses were built without chimneys; this led to the widespread folk belief that the *Kellergassen* were constructed as decoy villages intended to deceive enemies, especially the Turks. Since the production of wine was understood as a task performed only by men, the *Kellergassen* were described as male places, and this gave rise to numerous stories being written about them. The *Kellergassen* are only a few decades older than *Volkskunde* itself, but the cellars are the subject of a set of narratives created by amateur folklorists. These stories have been invented mainly during the last two centuries which created not only folkloristics but also made the region, located near the city of Vienna, become well-known as holiday resort (Koppensteiner 1997).

The regional government of Lower Austria and its tourist authorities have established the *Kellergassen* as an identity-forming icon of the region – regardless the fact that exactly the same

arrangement exists on the other side of the border in Moravia and in Slovakia, not to mention Hungary and some other Austrian regions. It may be just by accident that this icon was invented after the opening of the Iron Curtain.

On the Moravian side of the border there is a famous vegetable-gardening area where little cucumbers, *Znaimer Gurkerln*, have been produced since the 19th century and were famous all over the monarchy and in Germany. Recently, also after the fall of the Iron Curtain, the farming authorities of the region on the Austrian side of the border near the town of Retz have created a kind of counter-cucumber: the *Retzer Gurkerln*.

When Austria held the EU-Presidency, during the first meeting in the summer of 1998, the Austrian secretary of state Wolfgang Schüssel ceremoniously presented his European colleagues with sports shoes in Austria's red-white-red colours "to make Europe fit". At the second meeting, he gave his colleagues folksy coarse woollen coats from Austria. One could interpret his action as a symbolic attempt to promote the cultural unification of Europe, by inviting everyone to wear Austrian shoes; precisely the opposite was intended: a promotion of differences following the theory of a Europe of regions which is offered by EU publicists to counter the fear of an "European stew". Austria nonethe-

less performed its presidency by means of its nationalized culture, festivities, waltzes, folk culture and *Mozartkugeln* – as the EU's clichés demanded.

In 1998 it was reported that children in a communal kindergarten in Berlin had painted cows the way they knew from ads: violet and white-speckled. The kids had taken their image of reality from the Milka cow in TV commercials. When Switzerland celebrated its national holiday this year on August 1st, the city of Zürich was filled with hundreds of plastic cows. The cow-ization of Switzerland seems to be a part of a strategy to apply to the most perfectly industrialized country an image of the most perfectly domesticated rurality. Quotations are taken from the national mythology of the Swiss herdsmen, rather than from the precision tool maker. The result is a very effectively imaged reality which seems to be easy to handle.

Lately the revision of the Silk Road was brought up, re-enacting the historical commercial trade between Europe and China, thus supporting and smoothing new commerce and market orientations. The architecture of the Habsburgian Monarchy – especially the resemblance between the opera houses from Vienna, Trieste, Pécs, Karlsbad or Brno – which were built by the same architects, were used as evidence to (re-)construct a new idea of a central Europe ("Mitteleuropa") which is now to be located much more east than ever before (Magris 1993). An *Institut für den Donauraum* develops and puts forward an idealistic vision of the multiethnic Austrian Empire as a basis for new cultural alliances, and shapes a vision of a specific Austrian responsibility for the area. The glorification of the K.u.K.-Monarchy is now to be followed by the clarification of the lapsed Osmanian Empire in which the mechanics of tolerance towards the non-Turkish population in the Balkan area is to be focused upon in a series of Balkan studies (*Ethnologia Balkanica* 1997ff.; *Ethnographia Bulgarica* 1978). All this happens by using markers which are declared to be cultural ones. "Jede Generation wählt sich Trümmer aus der Vergangenheit und fügt sie entsprechend den eigenen Idealen und Wertungen zu Häusern eigener Art zusammen" (Elias 1969).

## The Story of the Fallen Borders

"Die alten Grenzen sind gefallen" was the title of an article concerning Salzburg's *Galerie Fotohof*, which deals in modern photography in Austria, praising the gallery as the country's top address for contemporary photography. The title of the exhibition was *Offene Grenzen* (Sonna 1998). The idea of falling walls and opening borders has become so popular in every context that it seems to be heard and read everywhere. Media writers and people talk of the "borders" of sexuality, of shame, of classes of states, etc., which now seem to be vanishing or more or less unimportant. The publication of the Clinton-Lewinsky videos, on the other hand, seems to underline the seemingly absolute lack of limitations; the public reaction provoked a demand for moral guidelines and boundaries of good taste.

The story finds its counterstory: while state borders are seeming to become less important, the selling-out of national enterprises to multinational buyers is perceived not only as a loss of familiar, everyday array but also and apparently more importantly as a national cultural tragedy. Social borders of classes and class differences which seemed to be very strict are being replaced by the more or less vague milieus or taste zones, which are not defined as sharply and seem to be very fluid, flowing across former social boundaries. On the other hand we can observe how new regions are being fashioned everywhere, we can watch them while they are under construction, we can read their instruction manuals, discuss their selection of mostly historical artefacts as signifiers and see the results. In Austria, a great number of new regions have been established the last decade, not only for touristic purposes (Senker 1998).

## Fashioning Cultural Areas

Not surprisingly, then (but perhaps a bit ironically), the title of a conference in Zagreb in October 1998 was "Where Does the Mediterranean begin?". "Mediterranean" might refer to the commonplace notion of a broadly similar set of cultural patterns which unites the area around the Mediterranean sea, which the Italian fascism defined strictly national terms, calling it

“mare nostrum”. It also refers to the idea of a longue durée of economic and ecological claims upon, and about it, by the nations which share its shores; and, subsequently, there developed cultural similarities around the Mediterranean, an idea which was developed by Fernand Braudel and the Annales group. But Braudel’s argument for an ecologically-based mentality has an inclination towards continuity and can be used as an anti-Balkan version of a newly-created and thus historically-rooted identity which orientates some countries toward Europe and others away from it. European in this regard is perceived as opposite to the Balkanian (Rihtman-Augustin 1998). It may work quite well and it may separate the good ones from the bad ones, changing the paradigm and using Balkanian and anti-Balkan patterns. Today we can observe that the commonalities of a region are no longer only a matter of self-evident history but are, above all, definitions created by an élite of word- and idea-coiners using any kind of histories quite arbitrarily. History can be one of the pieces of evidence quoted to create a region. The German politician Björn Engholm (a well known aficionado of the Toscana lifestyle) propounded the idea of the Baltic Sea as the “Mittelmeer des Nordens” and initiated the “Ars Baltica” in 1987.

Simply by renaming Samuel Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations* (Huntington 1997) as “the clash of cultures” changes its function and contours. Most people use the phrase and discuss the idea without having read the book. The title fits well into contemporary discourses and produces its own reality, often far from the author’s intentions. Cultural borders seem to have replaced state borders. But *Offene Grenzen* can also mean that a kind of undisciplined freedom (*Narrenfreiheit*) has taken centre-stage. On the other hand – as mentioned above – people seem to need borders, limitations and visible, touchable, reliable schemes of orderliness and predictability. Since the old orders are breaking down, we need to invent new ones to replace them (Foucault 1970); to tame and civilise formless chaos by naming and classifying its constituents – imposing our cultural scheme upon them. This is one of the leading ideas of modernity that we do not seem to be

able to discard. Post-modernity merely changes the labels. Nowadays, we talk more than ever about eras, epochs, we predict “decisive historical moments”, we think about breaks with the past, and liminal passages from one thing to another, quoting Victor Turner or Arnold van Gennep over and over again (Turner 1981), – all this, ironically, is a reflection on order and regularity rather than their absence.

## The Stress on Culture

Culture in this context can be everything. In France, soccer has become so important that Pierre Bourdieu and Marc Augé comment on it and describe it as a new form of national communion which has become transformed from the virtual reality of television images to the currency of Frenchness in the streets of the nation. The virtuality of peaceful multiethnic nation, united in *le football*, obscured another reality, at least for a time. Jacques Chirac and Lionel Jospin, thanks to the national soccer team, were more popular than ever before. The less they actually did, the higher their popularity index was. *La cohabitation* between socialists and conservatives also worked better than ever. Both President and Prime Minister took their vacations at the same time, a thing that had never happened before (Altwegg 1998). *La Marseillaise* was sung more frequently, and analysts had claimed a new multicultural euphoria had overtaken the nation – so that Jean Le Pen’s radicals seem to be out of the game. The right wing, with its national biological primordialism, was overwhelmed then by the new liberal religion of sport which formed the nation anew by means of culture. Quite similarly Croatia’s national pride was enormously increased by the fact that their national team had beaten the German football team and the accent on sport as culture made the country, including its government, obviously more acceptable within Europe.

Today anything can be marked as “culture”, as we know, “high” culture in the sense of the beaux-arts as in the Austrian case, where the Chancellor of the republic himself is in charge of culture and is called *Kulturkanzler*. Culture functions as a national enterprise and a mark of

distinction just because someone says so – and if others believe it because of a certain and mostly historical plausibility, it can work out quite well.

Since the “old” borders have vanished, new ones have had to be erected. These are not always smaller regions for touristic purposes, of the kind mentioned above. Local “roots” and culture, rather than class, are becoming the currency of contemporary identity discourses. The region and its cultural infrastructure dominates as the identity-marker. The German philosopher Eduard Spranger wrote about roots in a small but influential book first published in 1923, warning: *Weh’ dem, der nirgends wurzelt* (Spranger 1953). Hermann Lübbe, a German social philosopher, has described modern regionalism as a compensation for the ongoing vagueness in modernity of social rootedness (Lübbe 1981). If it is true that people are no longer socially incorporated into communities in the ways that they used to be, and if it is true that people – as Foucault said – have fallen out of a given social order, then contemporary authenticities are created by individuals doing their own identity-working (Bendix 1997). The more globalists praise their worldwide activities, the more people localize themselves in doing so. Even in the globalisation argument, the promotion of differences mingles with the metaphor of the soil, the regional. People more and more try to ground their existence locally, despite the fact that they live, act and consume globally (Köstlin 2000).

### Musealising the Local

The process of musealisation (Zacharias 1990) of the local shows to what degree we have learned to declare and to decipher our existence by means of stories concerning the region or the localities in which we live. Today the difference between North Germany and the South, for instance, is obscured only by the rhetorics of the division between East and West. Yet it could be argued that the German East of the former DDR from a Southern perspective has very clear connotations of the old and heartily-disliked North: Protestant, less comfortable, less authentically German.

Regions are fashioned today by means of

culture: in Austria, a series of CDs is called *Musik der Regionen* thus describing and defining regions which never before existed in such homogeneous cultural terms. Folklore experts today judge certain types of music as “wrong” or “right” for any given area. Folk costumes and folk songs have acquired new standardised and stereotyped meanings and moral value as identity-markers. The mapping of folk-culture elements in ethnographic atlases established regions and the cultural borders between them anew. Typicalities and statistical frequencies, in other people’s hands, readily become transformed into icons and stereotypes. Thus a speaker on a carnival presentation on TV could comment that a certain type of costume (*Weißnarren in der Baar*) did fit in the region: an after-effect of ethnographic mapping in the fifties. Again: a new demand for the delineation of borders has arisen as a consequence of our having said that the old ones have vanished.

### Mobility and the Local

To be prepared for mobility has become one of the central values within the ideology of globalisation, which some criticise as a fetish. But by the same process people (and sometimes the very same people) root themselves in their locality. They root themselves symbolically by eating local food, wearing local accessories or costumes and consuming and celebrating local customs. In Tyrol dumplings are used as identity markers and thus become – as Tyrolean dumplings – regional soul-food (Köstlin 1977) – even if some people don’t really like to eat them.

Unity and diversity: we handle both; we observe our world becoming more and more unified on the one hand, and on the other more and more disjointed. Unification seems to provoke a process of pluralisation and multiplexity. As the global nets small entities, regions gain more and more importance. Those two parallel and synchronous tendencies of unification and multiplexity, of mobility and the search for locality are contradictory only on the surface. They are a single phenomenon within the process of modernisation. The McDonaldisation of the world and its regionalisation by means of culture are result of the international-

isation of particular forms of modernity which became established long before the word "globalisation" was coined and the process was brought so sharply into view. The rise of regional food and nationalism that is so visible today belong to that phenomenon, which we now call globalisation (Köstlin 1996).

## Difference as Identity

What we call folk culture has been described and in manifold ways offered as one of the main resources for what is called identity by means of distinction and differentiation. Its paradox is that people's social roles have become transformed. Modern states, and those states which preceded them, which strove to forge their own identities as nations by unifying, universalising, centralising, and standardising have redefined the individual's primary role relationships as being those of a citizen of the state, subject to its laws, rather than to those relationships arising from kinship, community, and custom. From this has emerged a new diversity of *Stämme*, of regionalistic movements and tribes of Hyphen-Americans (Byron 1995) playing mostly harmless symbolic games which well-entrenched modern states can afford to tolerate or even to indulge (Köstlin 1979). Today, emphasising their local rootedness has become more important for a segment of our society than profession – and even managers use their roots as a resource to manipulate workers and customers to their companies' advantage.

Since the importance of leisure-time has increased in people's lives, and – according to its interpreters – is expected to be experienced as creative and self-actualising, it has become the field of modern man's identity-puzzle. More frequently people now have to perceive their identities as non-employed ones. Folk culture offers itself as a something which helps to articulate and produce diversities, which can be incorporated into modern life-styles. Even people like Arjun Appadurai mention that they live in more than one locality, and using the argument of the anti-local, they celebrate their existence as culturally patterned by diverse worlds of localities.

Given this background, folk culture and re-

gionalism make new sense. They diminish and avoid or euphemize the negative connotations of mass culture. Its localised and culturally-defined borders provide the means to accentuate uniqueness and stake claims to distinction. Regional and local culture stand for distinctiveness. In our traditional disciplinary discourses, we have promoted the differences and have neglected the similarities. Folk cultures have been treated as distinct, a priori. The distinctiveness of regional and local specialities is taken for granted. They are described and perceived as "genuine", "authentic" and "historically-rooted". Folk culture, put in the scene like other types of quotations mingles among the stage props in the theatre of modernity: folk-culture in this perspective is clearly avant garde. It is the most modern culture, promising to offer the central markers of identity. Its programme contains multivocality, distinction, uniqueness and authenticity plus democracy; and everybody seems to be empowered to take part in the game. On the other hand it seems to be something which can effectively oppose and counter the homogenising processes of modernity. Yet folk culture's attractiveness is to be understood only beyond the horizon of modernization, regardless the fact that it is a product of mass culture and its consumption practices.

Folk-culture can be easily incorporated in life-styles; it is a quotable style for identity purposes. A folder advertising *Trachten* (adaptations of folk-costumes) promises: "Living with tradition means to have a style which is above time". That is exactly the point: the newly-created accent on folk-regional culture promises timelessness in an ocean of temporality. It can claim timelessness because of its historical depth. Folk culture and culture suggest continuity and what is emphasized about them is that they are natural, invariant, deep-rooted and reliable. In search for timelessness, their borders as delineated in the national atlases of folk culture risk becoming interpreted as rigid distinctions, and thus usable as counterweights to mobility and the exacting demands of rapid changes.

Our analytical metaphors like "ethnoscapes" (Appadurai 1996) are only metaphors; we should take care not exaggerate the differences and inadvertently to support the idea of ethnically-

fashioned culture areas whose overdrawn distinctions can be used by less-scrupulous people, as in Yugoslavia. It cannot be by accident that in the newly-formed states of Croatia (Čapo-Žmegać 1998) and Slovakia (Stolicna 1997) recently volumes were published which describe their countries by means of their folk cultures, thus legitimating these states by their folkinesses but also in the worst case by deeply-rooted and irreconcilably-different ethnic "roots". Public folklore could be a useful part of our discipline: even if we do not realize it, we all practice "Public Folklore" (Welz 1996). At least some of us ought to reflect deliberately on this aspect of our business and ask what it is going to be used for, and by whom, here and abroad.

Our world is not merely a planet but a cosmos filled with meanings and senses which have already been set up by our predecessors, for instance by the practice of mapping cultural specialities (Zentai 1999: 70) like the national *Volkskunde-Atlas* did. The power of culture is going to overwhelm us if we cannot balance it. So, if it is true that we live in a *Kulturgesellschaft* (Lipp 1995) we have to reflect the power of what is called culture. It seems that the stories of the singularity and authenticity of local, regional or national culture fill in the gap and replace the state borders which people begin to miss, when the signs originally put up by state authorities begin to be taken down.

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