



BRACKETING

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The concept of “cultural bracketing” can be a tool for describing how diffuse and changeable is the world in which people move – full of possibilities and open to admit new experiences. Words combined with “cultural” otherwise can easily take on a deceptive clarity. But things are often latent, waiting to be put to use; they live an unnoticed life. If things are not clearly arranged in taxonomies and categories, what about people, thoughts, and mental processes?

Averted Remains

The benefit of thinking in terms of “bracketing” became clear to me in connection with my fieldwork in the region of Istria in Croatia at the end of the 1990s. At that time I had not yet become interested in the many monuments that I saw around me, commemorating the victory of socialism. Instead, I found the emergent regional movement seemed analytically rewarding. It differed in many ways from other contemporary efforts to shape local cultural identity in Europe. Instead of stressing autochthony, purity, and exclusion, the Istrian people celebrated ethnic and linguistic diversity. They emphasized today’s landscape more than that of the past, they looked forward rather than searching for roots, and were more interested in change than permanence (Frykman 1999, 2003). This was all the more remarkable in view of the fact that the nation to which they belonged, Croatia, in the aftermath of the war, closed itself in and concentrated on itself.

And yet partisan monuments still stood scattered in the landscape like inaccessible atavisms,

averted, brooding on a completely different history – as if they were not there. They were at crossroads and lookout points, in city squares, and wherever people gathered. Sometimes it was just a memorial tablet on a wall or some painted symbols and slogans. Others were impressive in format, sacral like sarcophagi, monuments to dead people from an alien world (Frykman 2001). Many were in decay, the inscriptions on the pedestals overgrown with lichen. For the people in charge of museums and cultural heritage management they were a classificatory dilemma, since they were not protected by legislation or by their artistic qualities. In people’s everyday lives, these objects were difficult to handle since they claimed a very definite ideological affiliation.

The fact that they were still standing at all was an indication that people in the region really did have openness and tolerance as a distinctive cultural feature. In other parts of Croatia the war had led to far-reaching iconoclasm. These objects were the remains of a state that no longer existed. Moreover, they represented the ideological and political repression from which the new state of Croatia wished to liberate itself. But here in the post-Yugoslavian Istria they still stood, half-forgotten, and – like any enigma – they invited questions. How can people live with something that so obviously *exists* – such as political monuments – when what they stand for no longer is there?

It is a characteristic of any political monument to withdraw into a very special shadow world. Memorials are only forced out into the open on red-letter

days and historic occasions. In the book *Nachlass zu Lebzeiten* the Austrian author Robert Musil has derided the invisibility in which they shroud themselves.

They are no doubt erected to be seen – indeed to attract attention. But at the same time they are impregnated with something that repels attention, causing the gaze to roll right off, like water droplets off an oilcloth, without even pausing for a moment. You can walk down the same street for months, know every address, every show window, every policeman along the way, and you won't even miss a coin that someone dropped on the sidewalk ... Many people have the same experience with larger-than-life-size-statues ... (Anderson 1998: 46).

It is, Musil says, as if it were against our very nature to notice them.

In the Middle of the Square

The memorial park in the middle of Liberty Square, *Trg Slobode*, in the city of Pazin is one such cultural parenthesis. There are dozens of busts and statues of celebrated freedom fighters and politically important figures from the region. A central granite monument depicts a half-naked worker with bulging muscles, his arms raised in combat posture. On the pedestal are the words: *SMRT FAŠIZMU – SLOBODA NARODU* “Death to fascism – freedom for the people”.

The park is deserted and poorly maintained, as if it were slowly sliding into the seclusion of ruin. People hurry to shops and workplaces; pensioners exercise their dogs and visitors take a short cut to the car park. On some dilapidated benches in the shade, schoolchildren turn their backs on the heroic figures, more interested in each other than in history. The wires on the three traditional iron flagpoles – one for the Party, one for Yugoslavia, and one for the Republic – are rusty from lack of use. No flowers adorn the pedestals, no wreaths with messages from old combatants or city dignitaries. This is yet another of the many places that Katherine Verdery (1999) has written about, where socialism derived

its strength from death and gave hope of delivery through eternal progress. Now the place is itself on the road to oblivion.

Here they stand, predecessors of a system and an ideology that many of them had not even heard of – the priest and evangelist of enlightenment Juraj Dobrila, who lived in the nineteenth century, the composer and recorder of folk music Ivan Matetić-Ronjgov alongside the anti-fascist Vladimir Gortan, and “heroes of the people” in the partisan struggles. In the shade of the trees they have been brought together, from many places and times, like the gods in a local pantheon. The resemblance to a site of pilgrimage is striking. The heroes must once have been honoured at annual ceremonies where dignitaries strode in stately pomp, wreaths of flowers were laid, red banners waved, bands played, and a ritual meal was served. *Partizanski grah* – a stew of beans with meat or sausage – was the traditional fare of the partisans.

But today people have tried to find a new use for the busts. As in the half-concealed “non-places” in the city, the ground is strewn with rubbish and the statues are painted with graffiti. Over the breast of the heroine of the people Olga Ban, someone has sprayed an anarchist A, and the same symbol covers Ivan Matetić-Ronjgov, who has also had his eyes, ears, and mouth painted white. Another hero of the people, Guiseppe Budici Pino, has been decorated with a nationalist U on his brow and someone has written the full form Ustaša on the pedestal. Doctor Matko Laginja has a piece of chewing gum stuck up his left nostril, and the hero Vladimir Gortan – who has roads, factories, and schools named after him – has had his ear plugged with chewing gum. Another bust bears the inscription *Komunjare* – “damned communists”.

Things in Waiting

The partisan monuments in Istria may serve here to illustrate the concept of cultural bracketing. It can be used to describe areas of culture which are pendant, in waiting mode. As a cultural researcher one focuses on what *exists* – symbols, narratives, rituals, and objects. With the “linguistic turn” in

the 1990s it became taken-for-granted to focus on text or discourse. The socialist ideology represented by the monuments could then be seen as something ever-present, as an interpretation to be uncovered. What are the messages carried by the monuments, the contexts to which they belong, the intertextuality that prevails between them and other representations? What are the rituals, oral traditions? How are they distributed in time and place? In what media do they occur? And so on.

Or if the researcher is inspired by studies of symbols and structures, it is then important to think about hierarchization, categorization, and classification. What is their place in the cognitive systems in people's minds? How do covering categories such as state symbolism relate to local compliance? How are categories distinguished with the aid of pollution, and how is the fear of mixing categories expressed in the local, and so on?

But what is a researcher to do with all the phenomena that hardly exist at all, those which do not create meaning? The ones that have been put into brackets, made temporarily invisible by being taken out of use? Is it possible to describe the oscillation between what could also be called "cultural latency" and explicit presence? Can we describe the things that do not speak to people by virtue of their usefulness, but which have not yet been categorized as refuse and thrown on the rubbish dump? The items that have ended up among the waste have thereby been given their set place in the universe of things (Åkesson 2005).

We are thus looking at something other than the eliminated categories, the ones placed in their respective pigeonholes outside normality. Things which have been sorted out are not infrequently labelled with words like *sacred*, *taboo*, *limbo*, *disgusting*, *dangerous*. These are things that have been pushed aside after being associated with dirt, repulsion, and fear (Douglas 1966). But something that is in brackets is not explicit but vague; it lacks the charge and the magical aura that pervades tabooed spheres. No power flows from it, and no effect is exercised. It is much closer to normality than to the extraordinary. It makes people yawn, not scream.

Everyday life seems to be full of things like this, which we once put aside "in case they become handy sometime", but we have lost interest in them. Farmers collect old trailers and parts of tractors behind the barn, to have them handy. The family fills the attic with the children's toys and grandfather's suits, just in case. Books gather dust on the shelves, but we still refuse to take them to a second-hand bookshop. Things are often in-between, neither used nor ready to be thrown away. And they are far too ordinary to end up in a museum.

Memories and Mortals

If the concept of cultural bracketing is a methodological tool that helps us to understand how things can be put in waiting mode, it may also be applicable to other spheres of culture – such as mental and social processes. Extensive research on memory and culture has clearly demonstrated that memory is not the same as an archive and that it is today, not yesterday, that gives clarity to what once happened (Aronsson 2004). The strong influence from psychology has made many look upon memory as a faculty that you can lose, something that is profoundly influenced by time, culture and society. What we call memory is a toolbox where the objects have numerous and varied uses.

Here in Istria there are oceans of knowledge which people have been unable to get rid of, but have chosen to put on hold. During the 1990s, unsorted stories began to appear about how the partisans had behaved at the end of the Second World War. They had summarily executed people who were suspected of collaborating with the fascists. These were memories that had been banished for a generation, poorly remembered and only furtively uttered. Some of this knowledge would have led to imprisonment if it had been aired in public. Now, in a war-torn country, it was suddenly filled with a different meaning, becoming a sharp weapon in the debate about the hidden horrors of socialism. It could justify the need of the nation state of Croatia to break away from the federal socialist state of Yugoslavia (Frykman 2004).

This is how it almost always is with politically risky memories: they wait for the day when they can

come to the surface. It is an obvious example of the way cultural brackets can function as more or less withheld memories. But one should not exaggerate intentionality. In 1991, people had not been sitting and waiting for liberation since 1945. But there is also another phase of latency, one which has received less attention. Throughout Eastern Europe the everyday memories of living under socialism have ended up in a no-man's-land, half-way between oblivion and recollection (Vuokov 2003).

The author Dubravka Ugrešić writes in her essay collection *The Culture of Lies* (1998), about how she felt like one of the survivors of Atlantis – but with the important difference that the things, the material remains, are still there while the narratives have disappeared. The links to the land in which she grew up have ceased to exist. The objects – the houses built in socialist functionalist style, the characteristic holders for the three flags, the offices with the low-placed windows through which visitors spoke to officials, the furniture of blue and orange plastic – all this is still there, as palpable as the monuments. But if people start to recollect the content of everyday life it immediately becomes problematic – the celebration of Father Frost, the initiation as a pioneer, and the congratulations to Comrade Tito on the Day of Youth. These are events which make people bite their tongues (cf. Mathiesen Hjemdahl & Škrbić Alempijević, this volume), not to speak of the many narratives about the home, friends, and upbringing under socialism. They easily become stamped as expressions of Yugo-nostalgia – with an undesirable political charge in a new nation that gained independence through war. This situation describes very well how memories are put in cultural brackets, even without a dictatorial policy directed against them.

Can one also apply a social perspective in order to see how individuals and groups view themselves as being inscribed in cultural brackets – living somewhere between marginalization and full membership? What happens, for example, to a person who is excluded from the labour market or sick-listed – without being stigmatized as criminal, deviant, or socially different? Such people live seemingly normal

lives among other people, but they notice that their voice has become weaker and they cannot make the same demands on those around them. This is much more common and far more crucial in society than the classical exclusion, which is a matter of distinct categorization.

A telling example of people who have not been given the status of outsiders – but just put in a state of readiness for it – are those who have been diagnosed with “burnout” (see Löfgren, this volume). They struggle with their social namelessness and homelessness, desperately trying to find out whose fault it is: the job, the boss, stress in general, or inadequate medical knowledge. Labels do not stick to them, and their labels are only approximate. This is a state of cultural latency which serves to exacerbate the condition of those afflicted by the diagnosis (Frykman & Hansen 2005; Lundén 2005).

In Praise of Vagueness

The concept of bracketing could be extended beyond the purely material. Its merit is that it helps the researcher to describe a diffuse world full of opportunities and open for receiving new experiences. It also helps us to question the deceptive clarity often ascribed to concepts combined with culture. Most things in culture are not in fact clearly categorized. Things are not properly ordered, not defined by function except when they are used or put on display in museums. It is only in exceptional cases that people belong to neat exclusive groups defined in terms of age, ethnicity, or gender. Most of the time they are a *you* in an intersubjective relationship; *people* in a crowd. Or perhaps *travellers* on a bus through Europe, who may be alternately friends, mothers, relatives, children, rich or poor, old, unmarried – and it is only when they cross national borders and have to take out their passports that they are defined according to *ethnic* and national affiliation. Their identification changes with the situation (cf. Povrzanović Frykman 2003).

Correspondingly, it is a gross simplification to say that symbols are bearers of messages. They are only rarely interpreted in accordance with the author's intentions, as the anthropologist Anthony Cohen

writes (1996). People always add and subtract. Some are accustomed to reading the idiom, others are not. Yet it is not a question of right and wrong, of skill and ignorance in interpreting symbols. The power that proceeds from them depends on *whether they make people think at all*. Do they have the ability to activate the observer? Do they give scope for interpretation? If so, about what? Do they open the way for actions and interpretations which are meaningful in the situation where the observer finds himself? Can they be incorporated into concrete plans – short or long – for individuals or for society?

It was not so much the symbolism in the monuments that spoke to people, but people's use of monuments to create action and meaning. The inhabitants of the city assembled before them annually on the special days; the guests of honour were there, brass bands played *Bandiera Rossa*, friends met, and people had an opportunity to show their loyalty to the party. When the occasion was over, the statues once again slipped back into Robert Musil's characteristic unnoticed state. After the break-up of Yugoslavia in 1991, gatherings like these did not bring any rewards. The world they pointed towards was a shrinking company of old veterans, but scarcely today's world, and definitely not the future.

Correspondingly, rituals around the monuments were not bearers of meaning in themselves. Like all rituals, these were filled with content in relation to the society surrounding the actors. If there is no such context, the phenomenon inevitably ends up in cultural brackets, awaiting a new interpretation.

Things as They Are

The things or phenomena that have ended up in cultural brackets become available for redefinitions through the force of circumstances. They can be taken up and filled with a different message. In this respect the concept resembles the way Edmund Husserl used the word *bracketing* or *Einklammerung* in phenomenological theory. Putting something in brackets means trying to see how it shows itself to experience. This means endeavouring not to think of the intellectual or power-inspired superstructure of interpretations, histories, analyses, and recon-

structions in order to be able to see "things as they are" (Moran 2000).

In philosophy this is a method for making progress in the analysis and interpretation of how a directly experienced world could be described. In cultural studies we can use the concept to study how people in their everyday practice manage to live in a given material world – despite changing external circumstances. We can examine how people, as in Istria, handle the dramatically different ideological conditions and divisive experiences of life in a country at war. What is put in brackets is set on neutral ground, banished to a place where one need not consider established definitions. It opens itself, it is "liberated" from intentions forced by the situation. Usually, every such move is mostly mental.

Tools

In a few years the many monuments of the partisans' struggles with the fascists will probably become tourist attractions. In Budapest the memorials of socialism have been resolutely moved to a special theme park – *Szobor Park*. Here, on an industrial estate on the outskirts of the city, they stand, urging each other to progress. It may seem like a bizarre experience, but the tourist brochures provide detailed descriptions of which buses to take to get there. In the theme park *Stalin World* or *Grutas Park* near the city of Druskininkai in Lithuania, the powerful leaders of the Soviet era stare straight into the forest, as tape-recorded revolutionary songs from bygone times resound between the spruce trees and over the popular children's playground. Theme parks like these show that the monuments have now been given a very different story to tell.

When the partisan monuments step out of their anonymity in Istria, they will probably tell of a region that not only hails ethnic and linguistic diversity, but also views itself as steward of an ideological pluralism. But then the symbols will have lost their political meaning and will have been incorporated into the cultural heritage. Perhaps, in a more distant future, they will once again be taken out of their political latency so that they can once again urge people to unite and fight.

The benefit that we as cultural researchers can gain from a concept like cultural bracketing is that we may become more attentive to diversity, changeability, the situational character of every sphere of culture. Things – like rituals, symbols, memories, stories, and texts – are generally tools which people use in order to perform tasks and resolve problems. Some of them are highly visible and vocal, while others exist as hidden resources which can be taken out when needed. Something that is in brackets is ambiguous, uncertain – a palimpsest for future messages. Brackets are temporary stopping places, something into which things, thoughts, and people are put – and from which they also emerge. This is their enormous significance for culture. It is strange to see how monuments, which were supposed to stand for all eternity proclaiming their messages, were quickly set in motion, so that even those cast in bronze and concrete soon became the most changeable parts of culture.

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