

# CULTURE, PLACE and LOCATION

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The notion ‘culture’ is probably one of the most complex, and has countless definitions. I’ll try to unfold a concept of culture in relation to the peculiar or even paradoxical tension between rootedness and freedom, between localism and homelessness.

Etymologically ‘culture’ is not in opposition to nature (as it is seen today) – on the contrary, its original meaning was the clearing of a place, the cultivation of natural growth. The Latin verb *colere* ranges in meaning from nourishing, caring, and inhabiting to worshipping and protecting. In the meaning of ‘inhabiting’ the term shifts to the Latin *colonus*, the settler, and further on to today’s colonialism. This wide scale of meaning marks the poles between which the concept of culture oscillates – it inherits on the one hand the imposing authority of the religious based ‘cult’, but shows on the other an awkward affinity to invasion and occupation.<sup>1</sup> The natural and the artificial, our transformation of the world as raw material, as the world’s transformation of ourselves, are in a dialectical relationship.

I borrow a poetical image from Shakespeare to illuminate the interplay between nature and culture:

*Yet nature is made better by no mean,  
But nature makes that mean: so o’er that art  
Which you say adds to nature, is an art  
That nature makes.  
[---]  
...this is an art  
Which does mend nature, – change it rather, but  
The art itself is nature.*

(William Shakespeare, *The Winter’s Tale*, Act IV, Scene III.)

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Terry Eagleton’s analysis of the versions of culture (Eagleton 2001: 7ff).

Nature generates culture, which in turn changes or even destroys that very nature – in another twist of the spiral, culture becomes something that should close the gap, that should restore an attachment to our natural base, an incorporation, and provide the integration into one's surroundings and society – an integration that is increasingly affected by the same culture and its products. The desire for embodiment and fullness lives on in our concept of culture,<sup>2</sup> infusing the contingency with meaning and signification as every symbol tries to make sense out of the chaos, sense that implies always a 'here', localisation and connection. Culture as the regaining of a primary integration into one's place holds *vice versa* the idea that culture is something regional or local, so to say, an organic emanation of the *genius loci* – intertwining at the same time rootedness and relativity. Johann Gottfried Herder was probably the first to use the word culture in the sense of a cultural identity, a way of living, which formed the home of a people. In an almost postmodern gesture, he proposed not to talk about culture any longer, but about cultures.<sup>3</sup> The plural shows a switch towards differences and differentiation, and that very variety was now seen as precious and important, as a sign of vitality. But with the idea, that every people or nation has its own distinct culture, the question of understanding the manifold expressions of an unique culture comes into view. Simultaneously, and paradoxically enough, culture became universal (as did art at the same time) in the possibility of absorbing one's own small-minded particularity into a greater medium, in shared humanity or brotherhood. And its understanding turned into a sort of divination that never comes to an end. Like the art piece, this concept tries to balance peculiarity and its implicit law, individuality and generality – creating a place and transcending it at the same time. If Geoffrey Hartman describes the function of culture as the transformation of longing into belonging in the course of history (Hartman 1997), he sets up the twofold implications of the term. The question still is how to stay related – without falling into the trap of an empty and abstract cosmopolitanism on the one hand, or dogmatism and fundamentalism on the other. The desire for belonging and rootedness again and again might result in conflict and even war, if the conjuration of the land,

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<sup>2</sup> Culture seen as a healing force as it reads in Wallace Steven's 'A cure of ourselves, that is equal to a cure of the ground, a cure beyond forgetfulness' (see Hartman 1997: 65).

<sup>3</sup> Herder's famous letters about Ossian and the Songs of old people is an enthusiastic presentation of songs and poems of different world regions and times, unified in beauty (see Herder 1973).

the earth, the places of memory, turn into nationalistic claims of identity. Then culture (as the founding metaphor) turns into the hostage of politics, becomes the *ultima ratio* of suicidal acts of self-differentiation. The longing for a separate and autonomous territory can develop into an alliance with terrorism, as the wish for foundation may support fundamentalism. The streams of money and media – insensitive to place and location – are in opposition to that territorial fight only at first glance. Rather, they are used or abused to fund such fundamentalist claims, as, *vice versa*, the fear of transitions or periods of transition towards globalisation may be exploited to underline fundamentalist concepts. It seems that nowadays culture means more the affirmation of a specific national, ethnic or regional identity – not its going beyond that identity, as we might experience through writings, works of art or music. The return of space/place and location in philosophical discourses is only the other side of the coin. We might point out that today culture is no longer part of the solution, rather, it has turned into part of the problem and into a battlefield.

Perhaps we should develop an open-minded concept of culture, shifting in the same paradoxical tension as has art since its invention. Its manifold manifestations opened the way for an imaginative universe, simultaneously melting away the idea of an objective truth, at least in the sphere of norms (Berlin 1992: 82). Similarly a poeticised term of culture<sup>4</sup> could be used to build up a vocabulary which enables us to create a sort of mobile self image, free to be widened in the encounter with other visions. Not the knowledge of an eternal truth, but imagination, is the most important instrument of the good as the capability of taking over one's place (Dewey 1998: 401). It is a constant balancing of imparting meaning, (that is not unchangeable sense) free of any dogmatic, centralistic significance. A corresponding idea might be the relationship between place and location. I'm here but simultaneously I'm elsewhere – place identity and place non-identity are not in opposition. Those heterotopias,<sup>5</sup> that are not fixed in a system become more and more the space we inhabit.

If we look at the fragments and fragmentations of today's world, the idea of territorial compactness and local traditionalism vanishes. But paradoxically

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<sup>4</sup> A concept which is widened by Richard Rorty. He sees persons and cultures as incorporated vocabularies, which have to be constantly corrected and opened through familiarity with other groups (Rorty 1992: 138ff).

<sup>5</sup> See Michel Foucault's idea of heterotopias as spaces outside of all space (Foucault 1986).

enough, the growing globalisation comes with new differentiations, with always more complicated divisions (Geertz 1996: 69). Cosmopolitanism and provincialism seem to go hand in hand. Nations, countries, states (as they were artificially created in the 19th century) are no longer a consensus, and cultures move beyond their connections to place – more and more, the idea of cultural identity is undermined by new and anonymous ‘spaces in transit’. It is the tension between location and dislocation, place and no-place that now fuels the question of the debate over culture. And perhaps it is again the artist and his work, that perpetually links the place as a sense-giving principle with the openness of space, that crosses and overlaps these oppositions. In a sort of sceptical movability, the artist jumps across his own borders without denying tradition, history, memory, or his actual reality. The free, floating imagination again and again locates itself in an imaginary locale – and we create the locus of the images as manifold palimpsests, that mix inner, strange, remembered visions and places. Precisely in the communication with the other, with something that we are not, topos and u-topos are no longer separated. As travellers we create images and meaning, staying at the same time partisans of a local culture. With a certain melancholia, those migrating images encompass the term of world culture, yet are its opposite.

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## Kultuur, koht ja paik

### Kokkuvõte

Herderi aegadest saati on mõistet “kultuur” peetud n-ö *genius loci* orgaaniliseks emanatsiooniks, millekski rahvuslikuks või regionaalseks. Seda kontseptsiooni iseloomustavad ühtaegu suhtelised ja kindlad kuuluvussuhted. Siiski võib individuaalsete kultuuride funktsiooni tänapäeval kirjeldada kui ajalukku kuulumise ihalemise muutumist ajalukku kuulumiseks. Kuid sel muutusel on kahetine tähendus. Küsimus on selles, kuidas hoida alal kohalikke sidemeid, langemata dogmatismi ja fundamentalismi lõksu – see tähendab maapinna ja ruumi, mille peal ja sees me oleme, kuulutamist pühaks. Kuuluvustunde ja juurdumuse ihalimine võib ikka ja jälle viia konfliktide ja isegi sõjani, kui maa, maapind, mälestustega seotud kohad muutuvad natsionalistliku hoiakuga identiteedi allikateks. Kultuurist saab siis poliitika pantvang, suitsidaalsete eneseeristusaktide *ultima ratio*. Põimuvad terror ja terav orienteeritus territooriumidele. Kitsamas mõistes kultuur on seevastu poetiseeritum, kandes edasi tähendusi (mis ei kujuta endast igavest tõde) vabana igasugusest tsentristlikust, dogmaatilisest mõttest – nii toimib kunstiteos.

Globaliseerumise tingimustes tõstatub teravamalt kui kunagi varem kultuuri mõistmise võimalikkus. Tänapäeva killustatud maailmas kaob territoriaalse kompaktsuse ja traditsionalismi idee. Kuid paradoksaalselt toob kasvav globaliseerumine kaasa uusi, üha keerukamate jaotustega eristusi. Kosmopoliitsus ja provintslus ei näi enam olevat vastandid. Rahvaste ja riikide piirid ei lange enam kultuuri piiridega kokku ja kultuure ei mõisteta enam ühtviisi. Kultuur vabaneb oma seotusest kohaga, identiteeti õõnestavad uued ja anonüümsed “üleminekuruumid”. Kultuuri mõistmises muutub oluliseks pinge koha ja kohatuse vahel. See nõuab koha kui tähendust kandva printsiibi sidumist ruumi avatusega. Topos ja u-topos ei ole enam eristatavad.