

# Tradition, Cultural Boundaries and the Constructions of Spaces of Identity\*

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## IDENTITY FORMATION

Central Europe is not a nation, and it is not a state. It is neither a political unit nor a geographical designation; yet Central Europe supposedly describes a geographical region, a set of cultural phenomena, a tradition, in short, a community that matters. This statement might seem very banal, yet the urgency of the discussions, the desperate attempts to look for a definition (defining it, that is, setting limits to the fluidity of a term, stabilizing its meaning) are indicative of the importance of such conceptualizations for coming to terms with what has been very often described as a “crisis of identity” in contemporary academic and popular discourse.

An obsession with defining this region can be traced back to the rise of nationalism in the first half of the nineteenth century, but it acquired a new sense of urgency in the 1980s, when old certainties no longer seemed to obtain and social, political and economic changes led to the breakdown of previously relatively stable representations of community and group memberships. Issues of identity formation have become the key to the interface between subject positions and social and cultural situations. A cultural turn has brought identity politics to the fore in geography and history, and added to the apparent need to find traces and definitions of a ‘Central European culture.’

This brings up questions of the basis of collective and individual identity formation may:

at first sight seem surprising, for the consistent logic of modern social and cultural thought has been to undermine the notion of individual identity. Sociologists and Marxists have insisted on its social determinations; Freud’s account of the unconscious showed the inherently split, and so non-identical, nature of the self; Saussurean linguistics posited the self as the product rather than the author of symbolic codes and systems; Foucault and others point to the processes of subjectification operated by cultural apparatuses and technologies. So why the return of identity as a theoretical topic and a political project? The logics of universalism and, more recently, modernization and

globalization have sought to represent localized identities as historical, regressive characteristics, and have worked to undermine the old allegiances of place and community. But the burgeoning of identity politics, and now nationalism, reveal a clear resistance to such universalizing strategies. (Morley and Robins viii)

Identity matters because it raises fundamental questions about how individuals and groups fit, are co-opted into or excluded from communities and the social world, and these meanings appear to be in crisis.

The answer to this crisis is very often a vague notion of some kind of “cultural community,” a representational form of belonging disengaged from political units that have fallen apart. Identity itself is regarded as a cultural phenomenon, implying that its construction is both symbolic and social. Identities are given meaning through the language and symbolic systems through which they are represented.

Doubtless this cultural turn in the search for identity is a consequence of the demise of the nation as what Rupert Emerson has called a “terminal community – the largest community that, when the chips are down, effectively commands men’s [sic] loyalty” (Emerson 95) and its discourse of unifying traditions, experiences and symbols. In its wake, geo-cultural notions gain new acceptance and fill the void, but leave more space for uncertainties and vagueness.

It is precisely this vagueness that draws attention to the underlying issues that are at stake here: invented traditions that form the basis for establishing not only cultural boundaries, but also for mechanisms of dominance and resistance, inclusion and exclusion. Identity as a representation is marked out by difference; the key questions have become those of power, boundary-marking and exclusion processes. If identity is crucially about difference, the politics of identity necessarily raises questions of authenticity, of roots, tradition and heritage.

#### SPACE, LOCATION AND CULTURAL BOUNDARIES

Why, one might wonder, is it so important to relate a symbolic representation of identity to space and place? The social experience of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, modernity:

... is a mode of vital experience – experience of space and time, of the self and others, of life’s possibilities and perils – that is shared by men and women all over the world today. ... To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. Modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology: in this sense, modernity can be said to unite all mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. (Berman 15)

The effect of the great dynamic forces of modernity – “the fragmentation of experience, the indeterminacy and mobility of identity, basically the production of new forms of subjectivity” (Eley 18) – has been to “disengage some basic forms of trust relation from the attributes of local contexts” (Giddens 108). Globalization, the extraordinary transformation where old structures of national states and communities have been broken up, has “created a sense of information flows, fragmentation and pace replacing what is now perceived to be a previous stability of homogeneity, community and place” (Carter, Donald and Squires viii), a perception that in itself gives rise to the notion of community. It is through the logic of globalization that the dynamic of modernization, supposed to be responsible for the rupture of, and thus heavy investment in, territorially defined identities, is most powerfully articulated; globalization has eroded territorial frontiers and boundaries and provoked confrontations of culture and identity:

It is the dispersal attendant on migrancy that disrupts and interrogates the overarching themes of modernity: the nation and its literature, language and sense of identity; the metropolis; the sense of center; the sense of psychic and cultural homogeneity. (Chambers 24)

Places may thus no longer be the clear, unique support for identity, and are certainly no longer tied to the political borderlines of nations, yet they still resonate throughout the imaginations of communities. Identities are shaped by embodied and embedded narratives, located in particular places. In the terms of cultural geography, it is not spaces which ground identification, but places. A space becomes a place by being invested with meaning, a social signification that produces identity, by being named, by “embodying the symbolic and imaginary investments of a population” (Morley and Robins xii). The point here is not to deny the force of such fictions but to show how and why they are so powerful as a prelude to acting on them.

It is precisely this fiction that seems to be threatened by the developments of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The presumed certainties of cultural identity, firmly located in particular places which housed stable cohesive communities of shared tradition and perspective, though never a reality for some, are increasingly disputed and displaced for all. Themes of cultural belonging, of home and exile, have to be explored through the diverse prisms of migration, diaspora, national identity and urban experience, and the loss of *Heimat* seems to be a fundamental condition of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, so the perceived need to stabilize this belonging seems to have acquired a new urgency.

## TRADITION

Pierre Nora writes that there are sites of memory (*lieux de mémoire*) because there are no longer real environments of memory (*milieux de mémoire*) (see Morley and Robins 87). This links place to its historical axis, spaces of identity to questions of collective memory and tradition. *Heimat*/homeland is a representation where place and memory, location and history intersect and are inextricably intertwined, in order to stabilize the meaning of community:

To cope with the fragmentation of the present, [some] communities seek a return to a lost past – coordinated by legends and landscapes; by stories of golden ages, enduring traditions, heroic deeds and dramatic destinies located in promised homelands with hallowed sites and scenery. (Woodward 17)

This is what constitutes *Heimat*/homeland: *Heimat* is about community centered around shared traditions and memories; it is a mythical bond rooted in a lost past. It is about conserving the fundamentals of culture and identity; and as such, it is about sustaining cultural boundaries and boundedness. Identity thus becomes a question of memory, and memories of home in particular. *Heimat*, in this sense, is a mirage, but a dangerous illusion, a result of the search for a rooted, bounded, whole and authentic identity. Enterprise and heritage culture represent protective strategies of response centered around the conservation, rather than the reinterpretation, of identities. “The driving imperative is to salvage centred, bounded and coherent identities – placed identities for placeless times, a struggle for wholeness and coherence through continuity. [...] Purified identities are constructed through the purification of space, through the maintenance of territorial boundaries and frontiers, as well as stories we tell ourselves about the past in constructing our identities in the present” (Morley and Robins 122), stories often rendered as (national) literature or cinema, the memory banks of our times. The past becomes sedimented into the present; conservation and tradition deny the dynamic forces which come together as a conjunction of many histories and many spaces. So what does this discussion imply for Central Europe as a space of identity?

## CENTRAL EUROPE AS A SPACE OF IDENTITY

In this context the constructions of a concept of a Central European culture can be seen as an instance of the articulation and activation of cultural meaning and identity combining notions of place with notions of collective memory (tradition). Place and tradition are invented discourses for justifying boundaries that affect people, but they are certainly less rigid imagined communities than a nation. It is precisely here that the challenges and threats of the notion must be situated. Attempts to establish the concept of a Central European identity are

necessarily accompanied by attempts to recover and rewrite history; it is the political assertion of identities that requires authentication through reclaiming one's history.

The debate about Central Europe that re-emerged in the 1980s was nostalgic in tone:

The retrospective focus was [...] the polyglot urban culture of pre-1914, mainly, but not entirely, of the Habsburg monarchy [sic]. Diversity was the catchword of this re-embraced central European world; skepticism and irony were proclaimed the unifying values of the central European intelligentsia, as of European culture as a whole. Indeed European values were better preserved by marginalized central Europeans, it was argued, than in the complacent, consumerist west. (Okey 127)

The climax of this was definitely the Viennese metropole of the *fin de siècle*, the ideal of diverse artists bonded to each other and to the essential character of their time and locale as a myth, the myth of "a modern avant-garde not homeless, but integrated into a real community, Klimt and Wagner and Loos thus become tablemates of Freud and Mahler and Wittgenstein at an imaginary coffeehouse for a shining moment in the city that was the cradle of modernity..." (Varnedoe 20, see also more recently: Horak).

The flexibility gained by separating place and tradition from nation even allows for the imperial theme in Austrian history to be integrated into this memory, substituting the (obviously broken) continuity of legal-institutional commonalities with "culture": cafés, Baroque style and the look of railway stations providing enough symbolic material to postulate, like Erhard Busek (former Austrian Minister for Education and Culture) and Emil Brix, a "new political culture," implying clearly a symbolic challenge to America by looking to the past monarchy as "a sphere where attitudes to history, right and human dignity were different from elsewhere" (Busek and Brix, quoted in Okey 128). This reverberates with the nostalgic meanings of a defensive identity of European belonging, a concept that is meant to overcome nationalisms by turning diversity, hybridity and migration into a tradition that denies other hybridities, a *Heimat* in the center of Europe where a supposedly common history and location safeguards against, and provides means for overcoming, future uncertainties.

Clearly the danger of the concept used in such a way is to become steeped in the longing for wholeness, unity and integrity. A discussion of Central Europe thus cannot, and must not, involve the construction of an imaginary homogeneity of identity, culture, place and tradition (this seems to be stating the obvious); it has to analyze the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion whereby one definition of Central Europe is centralized and others are marginalized, the "internal cultural colonialism" (Morley and Robins 91). This suggests adopting an epistemology of cultural difference that investigates the (culturally) con-

structured nature of these common symbols and histories and traces the multiple vectors of domination and resistance involved in their emergence.

A view that thinks of identity not as an already accomplished fact but as a production, which is never complete, always in process, and always within, not outside representation, in other words, a view that sees Central Europe as an object of constant negotiation, might provide a better basis for answering questions such as: Whose history is being negotiated? Which experiences constitute the past as part of an imagined community or (as Stuart Hall has put it) a community of subjects that speaks as we? How are differences manifested and represented? How is difference marked in relation to identity? What is the significant "other" of the identity being constructed? Which other markers of difference does it obscure (class, gender, popular culture)? And what effect does the classificatory system have on material and social conditions?

This calls for a conceptualization of Central Europe seen as a field of contestation and negotiation that produces plural identities. Discussions of the geographical and historical nature of Central Europe have so far tended to reveal a desire for clarity, a need to be sure about where Europe ends, a symbolic geography that separates the insiders from the outsiders, informed by history and politics, but implying identity. More nuanced perspectives could begin to reveal the important issues often elided by the lazy invocation of identity politics. They underlie the point that the quest for identity cannot be separated from the experience of division. A discussion of Central Europe that dispenses with notions of coherence and integrity based on place and tradition could expose the conflicting articulations on which such notions are and have been based.

Central Europe, and its cultures, must be seen as a "conjunction of many histories and many spaces" (Massey 1991). This is precisely the potential of its meaning, the utopian quality of the concept in its non-essentialist understanding. A Central European culture as a space of negotiation means that we would be dealing with a space within which both meaning and anxiety can be held and therefore worked upon, which implies coming to terms with the nature of our identity desires, and their situatedness in history. Possibly there are forms of collective association and community that might constitute precisely such containing spaces, but only if their contingent character, genesis, and potential is taken into account.

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#### NOTES

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