

THE LOCAL AND THE GLOBAL: IN SEARCH OF EUROPEAN IDENTITY IN THE CZECH LOCAL COMMUNITY

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As commonly described, Europe is a rich mosaic of cultures comprising a broad range of political cultures, languages and diverse histories. Cultural and historical pluralism creates worries and tensions among European countries that can be 'pacified' by means of increasing political and economic interconnectedness. But in addition to these, is there anything else that functions as a unifying principle for Europeanness? Is it just a level of political and economic unification or are there other processes, any by-products which can possibly bring about cohesion among the European countries?

To facilitate the contemporary process of the European unification, there have been many attempts to identify common cultural denominators which might serve both as a basis to define common Europeanness, and as an exclusionary principle supporting arbitrary decision-making concerning further enlargement. There is a perennial dispute concerning Europe based on the civic project and that of Europe as a domain of cultural exclusivity. On the one hand, primordialists debate European unity in terms of its cultural and religious roots stemming from a common Judeo-Christian base. These attitudes simply neglect the numerous populations found in contemporary Europe, other religious denominations than those mentioned, or those who rank among atheist communities; one should remember that they represent real people who are *already* part of Europe, who live here and cannot be wiped out from a virtual map of Europe through wishful thinking of European ideologists, politicians and administrators.

On the other hand, for modernists contemplating Europe as a whole, European identity is an active process in the making. It takes place through a series of encounters, dialogues and negotiations that are related to the 'outcome', i.e. European identity. Europe is an unfinished business, no one knows its final trajectory. Identity is seen as a long-term process, necessary to be separated from wishful thinking; the existence of European community cannot be envisaged. Such a relational identity does not assume an existence of a ready-made European community, rather it concentrates on reconfiguration and redefining processes that can be called common

Europe. So, rather than studying a specific region I intend to focus on a *problem*, and how this problem (i.e. reconfiguration and redefinition of rural lifestyle) is related to the idea of redefining Europe as a whole.

Research in Dolní Roveň

My research drew on the latest anthropological concepts of culture reflected by an empirical study conducted in the rural area of Dolní Roveň in the Czech Republic. The focus was on the relationship between global and local trends in culture, i.e. 'glocalization' (Robertson 1995). Emphasis was placed on generational, gender, and local (village) contexts of the data collected in the course of a two-year's fieldwork. The final outcome was a comparative analysis of global and local factors in the culture of the village. The research was also motivated by Cris Shore's book *Building Europe* (2002) which examines the project of constructing a European identity within the EU institutions under the provocative slogan 'Europe has been created: now we must create the Europeans.' Using culture (by elites) as a tool for forging a sense of cohesion and belonging is as old as the strategy deployed by nation-states builders. Can such a strategy lead to a 'people's' Europe?

The research in the rural environment of Dolní Roveň explored the shift from the local cultural arena towards the global one. The assumption was that the village has been in the process of losing features of a former rural community due to globalising tendencies and of becoming, as a semi-autonomous formation, a part of a much wider, interconnected world.

A typical rural population with its typical rural lifestyle no longer remains the terrain for folklore studies; these phenomena belong to a disappearing world. However, this is not at all a new phenomenon and - needless to say - the anthropologist's role here is not to rescue a vanishing culture or to reveal the 'noble savage' in a rural area. But rather, by studying issues concerning the relationship between global and local culture, one can contribute to the process of redefining Europe in the making. This necessitated a profound analysis of the reconfiguration and redefinition of the rural lifestyle.

The main interest was to study everyday life of the local people: patterns of leisure, ways of popular entertainment, and community activities. I examined villagers' relationship to various forms of culture, while noting both continuity in their interests – from the (pre)- socialist times till now- and discontinuity. I placed particular emphasis on popular culture as a representative of the global phenomena in the contemporary socio-cultural rural environment as opposed to the other forms of local manifestations of culture, namely high, folk or national, and 'European'. Why popular culture in particular? It is indisputable that popular culture has developed on a world scale, providing a new way to understand 'the meaning of life' (Fiske 1989, Storey 1997). So far, its expansionism has been unprecedented: it has managed to replace folk culture, it is aiming to conquer and/or take over high culture or at least it is seriously threatening its position. It seems as if popular culture is a success story. What is the role and mission of popular culture within a common European culture? Can popular culture serve as a basis for Europeaness? Popular culture represents a certain sphere of changing social realities which has been, to a certain extent, penetrating life in the above mentioned rural area in the Czech Republic. So far, it has addressed nearly all the layers of the local population whose many members have internalized its various texts and practices. The multi-faceted products of popular culture have merged with the residues of folk and national culture, they have even been challenging the scarce manifestations of high culture that occur in this rural area.

Dolní Roveň is semi-autonomous field with both inner and outer influences, characterized by urbanisation, changes in technology and social institutions. The socio-cultural transition indicates a remarkable shift from a traditional rural commune to a more open society. Before, the village was based on rustic philosophy – the relation to land as a cornerstone of rural identity. In the past, land initiated love, respect and patriotic feelings for a native village, region, country and nation. Thus, a village was a reservoir of national commonality and cohesion. Folk culture as a typical representative of rural culture is either disappearing or is being absorbed by mass or popular culture. The village is thus 'eroded' by elements of Europeanization and globalization – the village is no more a bounded island of national and/or folk culture.

Some examples of socio-cultural change in the village within social institutions concerned the daily press, radio, post-office, telegraph, railway and bus transport. Theatre, public lectures, knowledge and education, a wide range of community activities,

travels of villagers, countrymen's regular visits from abroad all brought new ideas, experience and values, and thus led to a thickening of the network of relations between Dolní Roveň and the world." (Galla 1939: 350). Many of these were internalized by the villagers to become part of quazi-rural lifestyle. Salient traditional rural features such as solidarity, kinship network and face-to-face relationships were replaced by atomisation, anonymity and closedness. A divide between urban and rural seemed fluid (Novotná 2004). It is necessary to stress that in rural areas a certain distinction persists, to some degree, between the people of the cities (*civitas* as it was rooted in Classical antiquity, equaling civilisation) and those of the rural areas (*rus*). The former represented 'civility' displaying the wealth, manners and cultural attainments of the urban dweller, whereas those of the countryside lacked these virtues (Thornton 1988: 21-22).

What is today's Roveň like? Its agrarian sphere, once the most salient characteristics of the rural environment, is almost irrelevant. Of 58.9 per cent of the economically active inhabitants, there are only 2.7 per cent farmers, that is 1.5 per cent of all respondents of a 2004 sociological survey (Skalník 2004). Moreover, this figure does not say whether farming is their major subsistence activity.

Community life, once the reservoir of immense village activities – organizing balls, concerts, dancing parties, puppet theatre, sports activities etc. – was extremely rich. These activities were developed both by temporary and permanent organisations. Among them, the most important were two: voluntary firemen brigades and *Sokol* (Falcon) members, founded in 1905. The firemen (founded in 1879) who organized most village events, were also among the traditional participants of religious holidays. It was the firemen who mark the most fluid continuity from the past to the present. The local firemen brigades (there are four, as there are four parts of the village-municipality) not only put out fires (which are scarce) but, above all, work as major village organisers of cultural life: balls, masquerade parade, children's day, witch-burning etc. Such events are manifestations of predominantly folk and popular culture, accompanied by brass bands, folk or country music.

Global culture and its impact of Roveners

Dolní Roveň is a site of multi-layered social reality: there are many layers between local and global that are constantly overlapping and reacting to one another. The local level is examined in relation to national and/or international level: apparently, the former is viewed as different from national – the

national seems less important for both the creators and consumers of local cultural events.

The present era, sometimes called the Information age or Post-industrial age, makes huge demands on people, incomparable with the past. The emphasis is put on performance, education, good career¹ and success. A Society of Education and Knowledge is being debated in public. Due to the influx of global culture, diverse forms of imported entertainment (texts and practices) are on the increase – this is in sharp contrast with the above mentioned requirement of the present time. How do the Roveners deal with such a schizophrenic situation? The results of this research indicate that they respond to the global challenge of knowledge rather the other way round. Active forms of gaining knowledge and the ambition to achieve better education is subdued by the massive attack of passive entertainment, largely in terms of popular culture.² Within the printed media, there is a prevalence of tabloids and popular magazines. On TV people prefer commercial channels, while watching both imported and domestic soapies and sitcoms, quiz shows, talkshows with popular celebrities. In their houses and flats, mainstream pop music steamrollers other genres, often working as background music. There are two public libraries in the village but the number of registered readers is very low: 32 readers of 1850 inhabitants³. Moreover, the number has been decreasing dramatically since 1989. The libraries offer quite cheap internet services but the villagers show little interest. On the whole, manifestations of high and national culture are sporadic, sustained by a small groups of enthusiasts - strong individualities. Moreover, they are increasingly absorbed or replaced by mass and popular culture.

The village has been witnessing the values that are typical of urban lifestyle: a need to go on holiday is in sharp contrast to the mythical image of rural life as an oasis of happiness and peace. Another value, individualism, is on increase as well – people tend to care just for themselves and their houses or gardens. Many of them are not willing to participate in the communal life.

There are some spells of activities that show a high degree of continuity with the past, both socialist and before 1948 (a shift in the scope and functions of cultural activities from the past to the present). These are predominantly carried out by the above mentioned firemen brigades, and also a very active Pensioners' Club. These organisations, however, tend to appeal mainly to the middle-aged people and elderly generation. Nonetheless, they prove an existence of a very active, relatively self-contained cultural community. Though a number of producers does not exceed the number of consumers.

the representation of active people is quite high. Perhaps, the desire to participate in public life stems from a nostalgia of the old socialist times – when euphoria of the 'communism-building' prevailed.⁴

Inter-generation difference

The younger generation shows more aspects of cultural discontinuity while carrying more signs of urban, European, global culture – more atomisation, individualism, preference of consumerism, passivity, and an overall retreat into the private. Also, national distinction among people is largely shaped by the differences between generations. Among the contemporary youths, there is little or none, perhaps due to internationalized pop culture and increased mobility (in terms of the offers for job/study exchange programmes). My research has revealed a relatively paradoxical situation: the democratisation of culture has brought about a certain fragmentation and separation of cultural production into the groups differentiated by generation. In the past, cultural events were attended by a large proportion of the rural population – at present, cultural performances have become phenomena rigidly oriented toward a specific age grouping. There are, however some cross-generational events, namely balls, masquerade parades, witch burnings, etc.

EU cultural politics

The recent EU resolution aims to cement the relationship and loyalty between Europe and the member states with something denser, or more 'solid' than just through bureaucracy, common political goals and economic interests, that is the awareness of common European culture and identity (Europeanness). However, our relationship to a supranational entity such as the European Union is political and/or economic rather than cultural. Hence, the European dilemma is as follows: political and economic interconnectedness versus cultural and historical diversity. Since the 1980s, European integration is seen as a cultural process: culture is to serve as a political instrument for furthering that construction process (Shore 2002: 1). But what role culture actually plays in the process of European integration, is difficult to say. Nor is it clear how European culture might be nurtured and diffused. And what actually constitutes European culture?

The way the European elite perceives the term culture is similar to the view of anthropologists. The focus, that is on language, historical memories, myths of ethnic descent etc. However, these aspects tend to divide rather than unite fellow Europeans. And as there are serious deficiencies in the cultural field there are sceptical voices forecasting a failure in creating European culture and identity. As A. D. Smith (1992) indicates, Europe is a utopian dream of

intellectuals and idealists with little chance of mobilising mass consciousness.

While the existence of the EU is undeniable, Homo Europaeus as a new type of political subject is missing. Europe's main cultural deficit - its *demos* - is missing. As Jean Monnet (1978) stated, the term '*homme européen*' marks a transnational, postnational political agent who will disconnect a parochial link with his local community or nation. According to this highly modernist vision, such an actor will become an uprooted cosmopolitan who will also be in the opposition to The Other - be that African, Asian, American, or Muslim. Self-evidently, cultural racism and xenophobia will be an inevitable corollary.

So far, there is no European identity or awareness that could compete with nationalism or ethnicity, or at least local identities, and which could offer an alternative base for cohesion and solidarity. Cultural factors such as shared history, historical memory, religion, language, myths are instrumental in *separating* Europe. Therefore, they cannot become the basis for unity. To put it differently, the grand vision of the EU legislators referring to this overarching, unified Europe is not a vision shared by most Europeans. On the contrary, people stay rather indifferent or even unfriendly towards the idea of unification. European integration has remained in the realm of elite ideology, condemned by the masses.

If we see Europe as fluid space with shifting boundaries and uncertain content, as an imagined geographical formation, emerging in people's minds, ideas and beliefs, the major question raised is: can a European identity be created? If Europe is a cultural construct, we have to ask who constructs it and for what purposes. Is it possible to create it by social engineering? Despite criticism of the explanatory power of economic forces, there is little approval of the fact that nations operate independently from economic variables.⁵ Economism still seems to remain powerful among both instrumentalists and constructivists.

Cultural integration can take place in two ways. It can be either a spontaneous, dynamic transition to integration which, according to the neofunctionalist approach, will pay well, or it can take an active form through intervention which supports the European idea by means of advertising campaigns to strengthen European identity, European values and its cultural heritage. So, Europeanness can be viewed as either a subconscious process or deliberate intention. The former view represents something like the air we breathe, or a process one cannot stop. Commonly, we are not aware of it unless there is a danger of being suffocated.

However, a question remains: can self-awareness alone bring Europe into being? The latter is being created within the EU institutions, and pushed forward by the new Europeanized elite all round the member states - at all levels of public administration. For these power elites, 'achieving' Europeanization is something like an implementation task: they advocate it and try to show initiative.

Emic conceptualisation of the process of Europeanisation

By focusing on the 'native's point of view', one must raise a question on how cultural dimensions of EU enlargement are viewed by people in specific locales. In terms of cultural Europe, are there any initiatives coming from the bottom - any commonalities, anything that really shapes the 'taste' of Europeans? Examining the attained level of Europeanness with the assistance of pragmatic approaches - through the research of everyday life - is complicated by the issue of who is more European, where is the norm, or a fixed point. Thus, the aim of anthropology of Europe, i.e. seeking differences and commonalities, must be based on research of *genuine* relations, not just wishes. A researcher must not build his/her hypotheses on the assumption that the relationship to Europe is automatically given.

The villagers I spoke to during my research have little awareness of EU cultural initiatives. However, when it comes to the relationship between the local firemen and their European identity, their alleged parochialism breaks down when they are eager to compete with other European firemen brigades.

The EU is predominantly viewed as an *economic* entity - 'where money is sitting, perhaps where it is going,' as one informant put it? Please quote: in the former case the idea is how to drain money from the EU and those who are capable of doing that are highly appreciated.⁶ The villagers tend to perceive Europe as an economic and political entity, swayed by the problems that may refer either to 'the others in Europe'-such as the recent decline of the European Constitution by the Netherlands and France, or the issues that may interfere directly with their existing lifestyles - e.g. adapting themselves to different European norms and regulations that infringe their everyday life. Hence, they view Europe as *cratos* power, without *demos* but it seems to be not their concern.

In conclusion, contemporary debates in anthropology over the concepts of identity, nation-building and Europeanisation seem very far away from these villagers everyday life, even in popularizing formats. They simply do not share the alleged cultural deficit, vividly reflected in the

absence of a European public by the European elites and scholars.

Notes

¹ In the Czech (since the split of the country in 1993) and Czechoslovak past, the term *career* had a negative connotation but over time, this has changed and the term has gained a new, more positive meaning.

² The term *passive* is not to indicate that consumers of popular culture are only passive, hopeless individuals who are manipulated by the ruling class of society, as was proposed by the Frankfurt School in the past. Rather, the assumption is that the target group 'consumes' cultural products in an active and creative way, which makes space for a potential change and motivation to reach it. As Fiske (1989) puts it, what matters, instead of the very cultural artefact, is the *process* by which cultural products are consumed.

³ What is interesting is that among the registered readers there are no men and just five children, the rest is formed by the middle-aged and elderly women who prefer cheap romances.

⁴ People took part in so-called selfhelp activities (*Akce Z*) - building of a collective out-door swimming pool, a playground, etc. They were also much keener on associating in community life.

⁵ National identities as a result of diverse historical experience support the widespread notion of big and small nations, sustained within the EU, for instance.

⁶ This concerns even those who are able to outwit the EU institutions, which can be viewed as one of the reminders of the socialist era and national ideology under socialism when it was a common strategy to fool the state with the aim to ensure a better living standard, or just for fun, to prove that it is possible.

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