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Beyond Diversity.

The Steady State of Reference Cultures

Joris van Eijnatten

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Abstract

The overwhelming popularity in academic writing of such concepts as transnationalism, anti-essentialism and postcolonialism illustrate the impact of the postmodern critique of once-stable entities ranging from the nation and the state to culture and civilization. We no longer believe in the steady orderings of humanity bequeathed by 'heavy modernity'. But does this mean that concepts like the nation and civilization are obsolete? This article takes issue with the current hype of transnationalism, and suggests a correction to the current focus on interconnectedness, networks and flows by introducing the concept of 'reference cultures'. It claims that in the history of the world, robust collective mentalities act as a counter-balance to cultures in motion.

Keywords: cultures in motion, reference cultures, transnationalism

Introduction

Interconnectedness, networks and flows have epitomized the mood of the humanities over the past two decades. The popular term transnationalism is one expression of this predilection for the transient and the mobile. However, there is more to culture than motion; movement, travel, nomadism and drift in a borderless world are not the end of the story. Introducing the term 'reference culture', this special issue proposes a corrective to the constant cultural kinetic suggested by the temper of our times.

There can be little doubt that transnationalism has become a well-established approach to history, in particular to global history, given the frequency with which the term crops up in calls for papers, research proposals and academic articles, as well as on institutional websites. Foregrounding movement across borders and through people, media and institutions, transnational approaches to the past have challenged the pretentiousness of national identities in respect to both their qualitative uniqueness and their distinctive origins.[1] Of course, the now not-so-very-young paradigm of the transnational is just one indication of a broader development. The concerted critique of nation-based history and its false message of cohesion has become evident through a range of isms, including anti-essentialism and postcolonialism. Few scholars will dispute the significance over the past twenty-five years of the tendency to identify 'negotiations', 'silences', 'margins', 'cross-overs', 'in-betweens', 'borders' and so on in relativizing the unambiguity of such once-stable entities as the nation, the state, culture or civilization.

This penchant for dissimilarity fits in well with the general collapse of certitudes in the last quarter of the twentieth century, particularly after 1989: perhaps not so much the demise of history or its grand narratives, but definitely the undermining of traditional fixities and assurances, and the realization that flux, difference and diversity were there to stay. Part of this postmodern impulse was inspired by an intellectual critique of the assumptions underlying nationalism, western modernity, eurocentrism and other concepts that became suspect in the 1990s, or were presented as such by the commentators of the period. Needless to say, much of this critique had (and still has) political overtones. Opposing the self-congratulatory celebration of communal identities and national or ethnic values on the right, there were as many if not more leftist multiculturalists who, no less self-congratulatory, applauded the continuous negotiation of power, the hybridity of all identities, and the lack of cultural unity as a value in itself.[2] Despite the politics, or possibly because of them, and *pace* the momentous clash of incompatible cultures usually associated with Samuel Huntington,[3] it is clear that this critique of heavy modernity and its conservative historiography is not going away. Knowledge, we believe, is circulated and exchanged, identities are predicated on an interchange between selves and others, and cultures are constructed as they travel across time and space.

Civilization 2.0: The Concept of Reference Culture

The undisputed success of the transnational as a multipurpose template for doing history plausibly, displaying one's up-to-dateness on the World Wide Web or applying for research funding does not mean that transnationalism has become the definitive way of coming to terms with the world as an interconnected global space in past and present. Transnationalism may have subverted the steady orderings of humanity according to language, culture, nation and other such 'Romantic' concepts, but that does not make the concept of, for instance, civilization (even when capitalized as Civilization) obsolete.[4] On the most abstract level, the tension between cultures and Culture is a version of the perennial problem of reconciling particularity with universality. In that sense, the term transnational is itself somewhat of a paradox. The 'trans-' itself disrupts and calls into question the very notion of the 'national'; and unless it is interpreted in Hegelian vein as a category of becoming, transnationalism can only be seen as an unfinished idea, a concept that has temporarily held centre stage by virtue of its oppositional character.

One way of illustrating this (that is, the tension in transnationalism as both a state of affairs and a process of becoming) is by applying Karl Deutsch's transactionalist theory to political entities and their concomitant historical-cultural subjectivities. A well-known conundrum is the lack of political and cultural integration on the level of the European Union, even though the individual states within that union are all consciously part of the same transnational European community. According to Deutsch, large-scale intercommunication among disparate social groups or nations leads to greater consolidation of the whole; the global economy, migratory movements, the Internet and centripetal events like the Eurovision Song Contest should have produced a robust European identity. That is obviously not the case. One way of solving the riddle is by stating that the theory is downright wrong; another is by arguing that 'transnational interaction is highly stratified across society'. While some social groups may act and think transnationally, others most emphatically do not, which means that only part of the population feels involved in European politics.[5] Meanwhile, the Eurovision Song Contest is more of an international than a transnational event, given that the proverbial *douze points* are awarded to nation-states, preferably

those that are culturally similar to one's own. The paradox is, of course, that in the context of Eurovision cultural similarity across nations is the result of transnational influence, including such disparate mechanisms as the drip drip effect of books in translation, the politically instigated machinations of 'soft power', and the self-organized, same-sex lobbies that have in recent years been responsible for much voting behaviour in the western part of Europe.

How, then, can we gauge the tension between cultures in motion and cultures in rest? There is an evident friction between, on the one hand, the transnational deconstruction of historical entities by emphasizing their inescapable openness to influences from outside, and, on the other, the way those entities figured (and still figure) as powerful images in the collective mind of historical actors. How to combine the particularities of cross-cultural influence with the patent generality and durability of robust collective mentalities? 'Europe' has been under global construction since at least classical antiquity and a case could easily be made for the non-existence of Europe, at least as a cultural entity. What is it, then, that distinguishes Europe from the rest? The question seems unanswerable; perhaps Europhiles must come to terms with the world as an indeterminate range of ever-changing cultural shades of grey. And yet practically all Europeans (and non-Europeans, for that matter) have an idea of what Europe has been, is, or should be.[6] There seems to be a tension involved here between detached observation and gut feeling, between, first, the obviousness of cross-cultural influence in daily life and, second, the often overriding impact of long-lived, consolidated images of cultural 'others' on public opinion. That tension is still with us today.

This special issue focuses on the nucleate images of cultures or civilizations that were constitutive of the mentalities of larger groups of people over longer periods of time. It is this sense of cultural semi-permanence, of a mentality encapsulated (rather *Annales*-like) in the unstoppable, behemothian stream of public consciousness, that the concept of 'reference cultures' is meant to convey. The concept addresses the fact that some cultures for decade after decade, if not century after century, have acted as models that other cultures imitated, adapted or resisted. Reference cultures are mental constructs or 'cognitive maps' that do not necessarily represent geopolitical realities with the internal hierarchies and recognizable borders that usually

accompany them. Mental reference cultures are typically established and negotiated in public discourse over many generations. Hence they have played a crucial role since time immemorial in the dynamics of global history.[7]

This Special Issue

By problematizing and exploring the concept of reference cultures, this issue hopes to contribute to evaluating the current hype of the transnational. Four authors demonstrate how cultural models or reference cultures have been created, copied, altered or challenged as result of or despite the transnational movement of people, ideas and things. They do so in completely different ways, showing the flexibility and therefore, hopefully, the usefulness of the concept in taking a small step 'beyond diversity'.

David Ellwood argues that 'America', as a *totum pro parte* for the United States, developed into a reference culture in elite European discourse particularly after the Second World War. Following Schumpeter's cue, he bases his argument on the idea of a model that both shapes the choosing mentality and narrows down the possibilities from which it could choose. The only choice open for twentieth-century Europeans was America, as the provider of more superior or at least more alluring norms and practices than any other culture in the world. Claiming provocatively that there is no alternative to America as a model of modernity, Ellwood predicts that for the time being the stars and stripes and everything it entails, from the land of unlimited possibilities to McDonalds and Hollywood, will continue to function as such for the rest of the world, whether we like it or not.

By contrast, Gerard Delanty discusses the role Europe itself fulfilled as a global reference culture, from the second half of the eighteenth century to the end of the First World War. He does not attempt to prove that Europe actually functioned as a reference culture – this is taken for granted – but offers an explanation as to why Europe was able historically to act as one. Europe, he argues, was able to play its world-historical part as a model to other 'civilizations', or rather 'civilizational constellations', due to its specific civilizational make-up, which was geared to the emergence of a highly successful version of modernity.

Modernity itself, argues Delanty, is not specifically European; it is a universal, and in that sense should be seen as a 'first-order reference culture'. European modernity was just one particular instance of modernity. Within the time frame of a century and a half it was both powerful and influential; it functioned, therefore, as a 'second-order reference culture'.

Europe's singularity, Delanty goes on to describe, is derived from five characteristics: its political fragmentation, a strong civil society, periodic ruptures, the pursuit of liberty (both individual and collective), and the cultivation of a world orientation. However, neither culture nor common institutions explain Europe's 'singularity'. Crucial was the existence of 'modes' of communication that enabled these five characteristics to develop in different ways in different parts of Europe. Europe's specificity is not based on cultural particularities, but on a certain civilizational affordance based on dense and durable communicative networks. This brings us back to the transnational, not as a means to an end, but as a concept denoting the inevitable state of flux that paradoxically constitutes the foundation of European identity. Europe's success as a reference culture was not a consequence of endogenous cultural factors, but quite substantially the result of exogenous ones. In other words, Europe became what it became because it was the principal global expression of transnational civilization, a Hegelian reconciliation of opposites frozen in occidental time.

Delanty, then, shows that it is possible to theorize the historical conditions that gave rise to a specific reference culture. His rich and fundamental analysis is complemented by two case studies from other authors, one on Japan, the other on classical antiquity.

Beate Loeffler's article on the 'perpetual Other' discusses Japanese architecture in the western imagination over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this case, it is Japan that acted as a reference culture, rather than America, Europe or the West. Loeffler distinguishes between two phases in the way Japan was referenced by western observers from the nineteenth century to the present. In the first period (1853–1900) Japan was interpreted from a negative perspective; at best it was seen as an example of backward exoticism. In the second period (1900–1945), however, in the context of the Modern Movement, Japan developed into a model of minimalist architecture. In passing, the author shows that the construction of a reference culture may depend on (or, as she claims,

are in fact crucial to the continued existence of) gaps in knowledge, which offer room for interpretation.

This case study by an expert on architecture on a synchronic reference culture is complemented by a case study on a diachronic reference culture from the point of view of comparative literature. Applying Foucault's notion of the 'transdiscursive' to the transtemporal, Karen Dovell draws our attention to the classical tradition as a reference culture surfacing in Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845). She thus demonstrates that cultural 'others' can be referenced across time, as well as space. Thus, in the 1840s Margaret Fuller employed Orphic texts to reinterpret gender relations and in particular to highlight the need for the feminine, in order to secure personal and social equity and wellbeing in modern society. The use made of reference cultures, so much is clear, is often highly selective – but that is precisely in the nature of reference cultures, a characteristic that in Fuller's case is all the more pronounced because an individual and not a collective was doing the referencing.

The articles in this special issue hopefully make clear the fruitfulness of the concept of reference cultures as a way of fleshing out the highly abstract tension between the particular and the general, as well as the ambulatory and the constant. Cultures may be in perpetual flux but collective mentalities are notoriously slow to catch up. Civilization 2.0 entails a cultural tendency to remain in steady state. For better or worse, that is a reality underlying the fabric of global history itself.

Notes

1 Steven Vertovec, *Transnationalism* (Key Ideas Series) (London and New York, 2009).

2 Jan Ifversen, 'Europe and European culture – a conceptual analysis', *European Societies* 4 (2002) 1–26; Bo Stråth, 'A European Identity. To the Historical Limits of a Concept', *European Journal of Social Theory* 5 (2002) 387–401.

3 Samuel P. Huntington, *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order* (New York, 1996); Lawrence E. Harrison and Samuel P. Huntington (eds), *Culture matters. How values shape human progress* (New York, 2000).

4 Cf. Johann P. Arnason, 'Civilizational analysis, social theory and comparative history', Gerard Delanty (ed.), *Handbook of contemporary European social theory* (London, New York, 2006) 230–241; Peter Wagner, 'From interpretation to civilization – and back: Analyzing the trajectories of non-European modernities', *European Journal of Social Theory* 14 (2011) 89–106.

5 Theresa Kuhn, 'Individual transnationalism, globalisation and euroscepticism. An empirical test of Deutsch's transactionalist theory', *European Journal of Political Research* 50 (2011) 811–837.

6 For various apporaches to this complicated question, see Peter Rietbergen, 'Prologue. Europe – a present with a past', idem, *Europe. A cultural history* (London etc, 2006) xvii–xxxvii; Heikki Mikkeli, 'The historical principles of European identity', idem, *Europe as an idea and an identity* (Houndmills, London, 1998) 195–212; Anthony Pagden, 'Europe: conceptualizing a continent', idem (ed.), *The idea of Europe. From antiquity to the European Union* (Cambridge, 2002) 33–54; John McCormick, 'Values: multicultural and secular', *Europeanism* (Oxford, 2010) 167–189; Alastair Bonnet, 'Occidental Utopia: The Neo-Liberal West', idem, *The idea of the West. Culture, politics and history* (Houndmills, 2004) 123–142; Michael Wintle, 'The identity of Europe and the image of Europe. Concepts, theory, methods', idem, *The image of Europe. Visualizing Europe in cartography and iconography throughout the ages* (Cambridge, 2009) 1–30.

7 For more information on the immediate research context of the notion of 'reference cultures', see http://translantis.wp.hum.uu.nl/program/.

About the Author

As a cultural historian, **Joris van Eijnatten** works on various interrelated fields, including the history of ideas, religion, media and communication, and digital humanities. His research involves source material ranging from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. Joris van Eijnatten is Professor in Cultural History at Utrecht University and an editor of the open-access journal *HCM*, the *International Journal for History, Culture and Modernity*. E-mail: J.vanEijnatten@uu.nl