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DEFINING "PROVINCE"?

Peter Spillmann

By having come into being differently, the cultural categories of city and countryside already encompass a distinct line of demarcation. Thus, designating the "provinces" or "provincial", entails more than geographic or economic criteria.

The most fundamental difference between city and countryside harks back to the culturally constructed 18th- and 19th-century claim on behalf of a distinction between culture and nature. At first, it was only the elite, which included many artists, who sought out some form of the "primal" and "authentic" in the countryside; these would later be followed by the tourist masses. In their eyes, the rural structures and cultural mores, the landscapes – in Central Europe, mostly as a consequence of their specific agricultural exploitation – and the social structures born thereof all seemed to sharply contrast with the phenomena of urban "alienation" and individualization and the disintegration of traditions these allegedly brought in their wake.

The superiority of the travelling classes has ever been twofold. On the one hand, it derives from a growing lead in acquired information, together with the opportunity to arbitrarily appropriate all sorts of manners and customs. On the other, travel enables them to constantly make comparisons and, by the same token, to reinforce their self-confidence in their own (cultural) advantage. From the start then, outlying areas have been considered as zones of "cultural latency" where, in the best of cases, one might come across fragments or traces of past, residual or exotic cultures. Quite to the contrary, cultural standards and the trends of the day hail from the Big City (i.e. from the North/from Europe). This longstanding attitude of the urban elite towards

rural regions, somewhat in a colonialist vein, continues to mark our own perception of outlying areas: We idealize the countryside and nature, flocking there for our good health and relaxation, or sensing adventure. Yet time and time again, we find it all so backward.

However, from a cultural point of view, the globalization process is radically challenging the hegemony of the world's few major urban cultural centres. Indeed, as a result of today's increasing mobility and the availability of information and of all possible cultural codes and signs, we are experiencing a fundamental popularization and democratization of our taste and aesthetics. Growing numbers of players feel authorized to establish their own boundaries. For instance, they readily develop and share with others certain quality criteria, thus allowing their tastes and preferences to blossom independently of – or in deliberate deviation from – urban centre trends. One of the contemporary social sites to emerge from this process is a certain inter-space that loosely falls under the heading "agglomeration". As such, the "provincial" represents – in a manner of speaking – the cast shadow of any alleged political, economic or cultural superiority. The "province" begins at the cultural line of demarcation drawn by each.

Be that as it may, there is as little chance for the importation of culture from an urban centre to overcome the "provincial" as there is for the targeted insertion of high culture to keep formerly brilliant centres from dispersing into glowing agglomerations.