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Tomas Kavaliauskas, Ullrich Kockel
An enlightened localism
Ullrich Kockel in interview

In a wide−ranging discussion of European identity and regional separatisms, scholar of European ethnology Ullrich Kockel considers how competing memories need not lead to conflict but can be turned into a creative force through cultural engagement based on mutual respect.

Tomas Kavaliauskas: Let me start our conversation with the issue of separatism in the European Union. Last year Scotland had a referendum on leaving the United Kingdom, the Catalans imitated the Baltic Way of 1989 in manifesting their will to leave Spain, and there is a similar mood in Belgian Flanders and Wallonia. At the same time, the Russian propaganda machine instrumentalizes the Russian−speaking minorities in Latvia and Estonia, and especially in Ukraine, in order to stimulate separatism. Under these geopolitical circumstances, the leaders of the Baltic States were very wary about supporting Scottish and Catalan aspirations for full independence, despite memories of striving for freedom after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Interestingly, because of the Kremlin's interest in promoting separatism, even Lithuanian intellectuals did not support these aspirations in Catalonia; for instance, Lithuanian PEN did not support Catalan PEN's show of support for separation from Spain. Does this mean that the Baltic States are in a "moral trap" −− they value their own separation from the former Soviet Union, but once they have their freedom, they cannot support the value of freedom for other nations while geopolitical circumstances remain unfavourable? Or perhaps the Baltic States are simply Machiavellian −− how to distinguish a political vice from a political virtue depends on circumstances...

Ullrich Kockel: What you are describing represents what Gregory Bateson analysed as a "double−bind"[1] −− a situation where conflicting messages are received that negate each other; where responding successfully to one challenge simultaneously means failing on the other. Since you mentioned Scotland: the Scottish government has found itself in such a double−bind situation regarding its devolved powers to vary certain tax rates. The British government in Westminster has imposed cuts across the United Kingdom and told the Scottish government that it has the option to raise taxes to counterbalance the socially devastating effects of the cuts. This creates a situation where cuts targeting a particular section of the population in the rest of the UK may be rolled out across the entire population in Scotland in an effort to soften their impact on the most vulnerable. Westminster has taken the gamble that the increased popularity of the current Scottish National Party (SNP) majority government among poorer groups in Scotland will be more than off−set by a loss in popularity among a middle class facing tax hikes,

ultimately resulting in the ousting of the SNP from government. The SNP is, of course, well aware of this cynical gamble, hence their emphasis on "full fiscal autonomy", which they understand (at the moment) not as involving a full set of fiscal institutions that would come with independence, but as full control over government expenditure as well as income, that is, a situation where the Scottish government would determine the level of any cuts imposed on Scotland, rather than merely having half−baked powers to respond to cuts imposed from outside against its will.

To get back to the Baltics: political movements for separatism, and the governments that may result if these movements are successful, have to walk a tight−rope between, on the one hand, celebrating the differences that justify their separatism and, on the other hand, facing up to the actual political implications of these differences. That applies particularly to small nations –– and any real nations will have to be relatively small to be viable in the longer term. A hundred years ago, some big established empires waged a war that the leader of a newly emerging empire –– the USA –– subsequently characterized as a war for the right of small nations to self−determination. This description was not universally applicable –– while British imperial forces defended Belgium, they also squashed a nationalist rebellion in the empire's Irish backyard. There is a political rhetoric here that is truly Machiavellian, which says that "big", centripetal nationalism, which pulls disparate regions and ethnicities together under the hegemony of a dominant region and/or group, is "good" whereas "small", centrifugal nationalism that aims at separation and self−determination is "bad".

In other words: "Russia", "Germany", "France", "Spain", "Italy", "(Great) Britain", even "the EU" are political ideas that are legitimate in using a "national" narrative to justify the kind of Union of disparate parts they represent, as exemplified in British prime minister David Cameron's "one family of nations" narrative. From this perspective, the domination of economic and political centres over their peripheries appears right and legitimate, while the separatism of small units can be portrayed as wrong and illegitimate. In some instances, as in the case of Russia, the imperial aspiration may be blended with an expansive type of ethnic nationalism that, as you suggest, instrumentalizes extra−territorial minorities for imperial purposes. The recent Danish TV production *1864* showed this for Schleswig, the historically contested frontier between Germany and Denmark. That dispute was only finally settled in 1955, almost half a millennium after the first attempt at a political settlement.

One of the problems governments of all states face is the threat of a domino effect –– that the success of one separatist movement will encourage another and another. Historical narratives are contingent on their chosen time−horizon. In an independent Lithuania, a movement for a separate Westlitauen or Memelland may no longer be a live issue (if it ever was), given the small size of the population potentially interested in it, but a movement for realignment of the boundary with Poland is still conceivable, if not very likely. One could look at the Hungarian minority in Slovakia or Romania, or many other examples: the reluctance of small states to support separatism elsewhere may have more to do with concerns for their own backyards than with their fear of a giant neighbour.

TK: Let's turn to the construction of European identity. At the same time as secular Brussels teaches central and eastern European member states obligatory tolerance towards minorities (sexual, religious and ethnic), there is

on the western side of "old Europe" a process of Islamization underway that is set against the secularization of Europe. May I ask how you –– as an anthropologist –– interpret the process of Europe's cultural Islamization when the project of secularization remains unfinished? Orthodox Romania and Bulgaria, and Catholic countries like Poland and Lithuania are still in the process of learning to accept the "cosmopolitan" values of multiculturalism. How do you regard these processes?

UK: We are dealing with more than one process here, and none of the processes in question are helpfully analysed in terms of secularization, although that has been a very popular figure of discourse for some time. Secularization and its "rolling back" in different spheres are facets of and perspectives on a more complex problem. Nearly a century ago, Sigmund Freud talked about "civilization and its discontents", as *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* is usually translated.[2] The context may have been different, but the concept implied does grasp the contemporary actuality you refer to rather well. Islamism is not so much about religion versus a secular society; it is a political ideology of identity that uses religion as a badge. In that regard it is quite secular. Where it clashes with European Enlightenment–style secularism is in its use of religion as a ready justification for violence that has no real foundation in the religious teachings it refers to. European history is full of examples when Christianity was used in much the same way as Islam is here. Certain cultural evolutionists will deduce from this that Islam just lags behind "the West" on the road to civilization and will get there if only we teach its protagonists the "right" values. That is a rather dangerous analysis and a sure recipe for aggravating conflict. Cultural development rarely follows a unidirectional, linear path. Islamic culture was highly advanced at a time when Europe was going through what historians call "the Dark Ages". The influence of that culture north of the Mediterranean is profound to this day; Arabic numerals, for example, are so much more convenient for complex calculations than the Roman ones in use before.

With regard to constructing a European identity, this is impossible without recognition of the Arab contribution to science and philosophy, or the Ottoman contribution to thinking about bureaucratic organization and management. Centuries of colonization have left indigenous Muslim populations in the Balkans and the former Soviet Union; if we draw the boundaries of Europe to include these regions, we need to engage with that factor in any identity construction. Moreover, even a "post–Christian" Europe is intimately connected not just with Judaism: Islam developed on the same foundations as the "Judeo–Christian" worldview. One might even argue that it emerged as (in a twenty–first century sense of that term) a critique of it –– just as Enlightenment secularism did. In that sense, we are talking about parallel, juxtaposed sets of worldviews that appear asynchronic only because one of them –– that of the "other" –– resembles to some minds an earlier period of our own history, and the mirror of cultural memory may spook us.

But back to European identity: neither Islamism nor what western leaders may see as the "stick–in–the–mud" conservatism of culturally and politically Catholic or Orthodox countries is, in my opinion, the biggest challenge to European identity construction. More important, but largely unrecognized, is the re–colonization of Europe by values that originated in Europe but whose protagonists were, sometimes forcefully, encouraged to move overseas where they were deemed to be less of a nuisance to the European powers of the day. It is an uncomfortable fact for constructors of European identity that the Ku–Klux–Klan, for example, is, deep down, an expression of European

cultural heritage –– as is much of what contemporary European culture critics reject as "Americanization".

TK: In your book *Re–visioning Europe* you asked your reader: "Where is Europe?" Then you state: "I am tempted to say: only in the ethnic frontier can Europe be found [...] regions understood as meaningful ecological contexts [...] –– locational spaces with boundaries that are somewhat blurred rather than neat and clear–cut. My search for Europe over the past few decades has seen me outgrow a youthful internationalism that knows no ties to local or historical roots, towards a perspective of what I might call an 'enlightened' localism."[3] Would it be correct to say that for you Europe is not a geographical space with a centre where one could put a flag like in the middle of the North Pole, but rather a dispersed multicultural constellation of granular–like local *Heimats*?

UK: Yes, indeed. Some years ago, Stanislaw Mucha produced a fabulous, off–beat film called Die Mitte ("The centre") that charted his quest to locate the centre of Europe.[4] He visited several places between the German Rhineland and Eastern Lithuania, all of which lay claim to being "the centre of Europe". The cover picture of my book that you refer to shows the star–crowned pillar that marks the precise point of the "geographical centre" of Europe north of Vilnius, as calculated by a team of French geographers. It all depends on what you define as Europe –– that is, where you draw its boundaries –– and what you regard as the characteristics of centrality. Are we talking about a geometrical centre, a centre of gravity, a centre of attention? The list is almost endless, and so is the number of possible locations. That is bad news for the territorialists aiming to stake their claim with flagpoles, and for their banal nationalism.

When we talk about *Heimat* as a space of belonging –– whether in the narrative, discursive sense or as sentient attachment to a concrete, embodied actuality –– we need to allow for the contingency of it all. In an earlier book, *Borderline Cases*, I tried to capture this contingency of belonging by using Hermann Bausinger's concept of a free–floating (*freischwebende*) *Heimat*. This concept refers to a post–Romantic cross–cultural space of belonging that emerged in the course of German nation–building in the nineteenth century –– a space simultaneously everywhere, and nowhere in particular. Most members of the newly created "German nation" could develop a sentient attachment to this non–place, which few of them had ever experienced materially. One aspect of this iconography of *Heimat* was that it brazenly glossed over real regional differences that the process of internal colonialism sought to obliterate. The picture of a roaring stag in a mountain glen epitomized that sentient attachment not only for the Bavarians who at least could find such ecological settings in their territory –– it did so also for inhabitants of the North European Plain, with not a mountain in sight anywhere near their meaningful everyday "native land". It is rather interesting how the victorious party in internal colonialism often usurps imaginaries of the vanquished and turns selected icons into emblems of the new union that are then deployed to project that union abroad: Bavarian *Lederhosen* as a symbol of Germany have a similar politico–iconographic status to the Scottish kilt as a symbol of Britain.

TK: As a Lithuanian I would like to discuss the issues of Lithuanian identity in relation to its memory. Lithuanian identity is usually constructed by local historians either via the lens of the Great Duchy of Lithuania (with enthusiastic inclusion of the Polish cultural heritage) or via the headwaters of the tribes of the Balts. This is to overlook that, in the intervening period between

contemporary Lithuania–ness and the tribes of the Balts, we had an enormous gap of several centuries of the Slavic Great Duchy of Lithuania.

However, we have a third option –– the region of Klaipeda with the history of Lithuania Minor (also known as Prussian Lithuania). After all, the path to the modern Lithuanian language as well as to the sovereign state –– as philological and political anti–Polish project of 1918 –– was forged to a large extent by intellectuals who came from the region of Lithuania Minor or Prussian Lithuania. Kristijonas Donelaitis is one of the main heralds of the Lithuanian language. In addition, the German writer Thomas Mann spent three summers in the town of Nida, on the Curonian Spit, a fact that could add German–Prussian–Lithuanian Minor identity flavours.

A view from the Curonian Spit, Lithuania. Photo: Kyle Taylor. Source: Flickr

What is your opinion about these competing memories of the Great Duchy of Lithuania with its Polish flavours and of Prussian Lithuania with its German flavours? After all the emphasis on one memory in order to exclude or undermine the other has significant ideological consequences in the construction of national identity.

UK: There are many contemporary states that, having arisen out of the spirit of nineteenth–century nationalism, find themselves with these rather strangely iconic territories seen as essential for the formation of national identities, but which, in the process of state formation, have ended up wholly or partly outside the political boundaries of the state: Ulster in Ireland; Karelia for Finland; Schleswig for Denmark; Transylvania for Hungary, the FYR Macedonia for Greece, or Navarra for the Basque Country. However, of these examples, none is quite comparable to Lithuania. Finland also faces in two directions –– Sweden and Russia –– but Karelia, most of which lies today to the east and south of Finland, has a particularly strong significance for the national narrative, even though many (if not most) collectors and (re–)inventors of the Karelian folk tradition were of Swedish background. Apparent contradictions like this are fairly common in nation–building: the Gaelic Revival in Ireland had many champions from a British–Protestant background, one of them even becoming the first President of the Irish Republic.

Euskadi, the Basque Country, also faces in two directions –– Spain and France –– but the national narrative is focused far more on Navarra, the ancient Basque principality, than on the also ethnically Basque provinces north of the Pyrenees. Today Navarra is a separate autonomous region of Spain, not part of Euskadi, with a predominantly non–Basque population –– all of which poses a major challenge for the nationalist narrative and future vision.

Where does Lithuania sit in this regard? Overall, the Polish narrative is historically the more salient one, not least because the Commonwealth can be construed as having been a Lithuanian creation through the Jagellonian dynastic succession –– much as the Scots created the United Kingdom through the Stuart dynastic succession. There are many more parallels between these two polities that I would like to explore another time. For now, it is worth noting that the Polish connection is indeed a strong one, but as in all frontier territories, identities are hard to categorize without resorting to often multiple hyphenation or, the other extreme, refusing categorization in terms of nation states in favour of a discourse of being "from here" (as in the Slavonic *tuteishi* or the German *Hiesige*).

Lithuania Minor is a different matter. In a sense, the Lietuvininkai were and are a frontier people, *Hiesige*, who were both German and Lithuanian but at the same time neither, or either as they could only be within the other, much as the *Schleswiger* were historically suspected of being both German and Danish, neither, and people of their own, all at once. The 1920 referendum settled the Schleswig question in binary terms that left a double minority. The large–scale displacement of people at the end of World War II left Lithuania Minor in a rather more clear–cut situation, where the remaining German population was tiny and rapidly dwindling, leaving the Prussian heritage very much as the remnants of an increasingly distant past. Two interesting phenomena in this regard are the growing interest among a post–War immigrant population in discovering and maintaining that heritage, and the revival of Curonian and pre–German Prussian culture and language that has also been noticed in Latvia.

Most of Lithuania Minor is today part of the Republic of Lithuania, but a sizeable part of Suvalkija, including the town of Suwalki that gave the province its name, is located in Poland. From a nationalist perspective, the integrity of the nation is thus violated on several fronts and requires reconciliation. The crux with national identities is that their construction is usually predicated on territory. Even a "global Basque–ness" discourse advanced since the late 1950s, which appeals to a self–ascribed ethnicity wherever it can be found, ultimately remains tied down (quite literally) by a territorial imperative that insists on drawing lines on a map separating "ours" from "theirs". There are a few isolated cases in the world where such an identity politics would not have led to some form of ethnic cleansing by either physical displacement, forced assimilation, or both. But these are superficial "solutions" that only postpone conflict as memories persist and are turned into either harmless nostalgia or, more often, confrontational ideology.

Memory is highly actual regardless of any foundations in material reality. While it is ontologically obvious that we cannot change the past that was, we can adapt and even recreate it to suit our present purposes for the future. That's why heritage has become such a hot topic at the same time as discourses of globalization, cosmopolitanism and transnationalism are making conventional heritage discourses increasingly untenable. In these circumstances, one might have expected heritage and memory to fade into discursive irrelevance –– instead they have acquired a renewed *Sprengkraft* (explosive power). After a period when "heritage" and "culture" were seen simply as "industries" with resources that needed exploitation for (and political direction towards) individualistic economic ends, we are seeing in the early twenty–first century a realignment of "culture", "heritage" and "memory" in two directions. One is a return to old–style, clearly right–of–centre, shallow essentialist petty nationalism; the other is an emancipatory, inclusive, largely left–of–centre

multitude, in search of deeper essences underlying a distinctiveness that connects rather than divides. The movement for Scottish independence is largely an example of the latter, although there are also remnants of the former on its fringes.

What does all this have to do with Lithuania and your question? Competing memories can lead to conflict, but contrast can also be a positive, culturally creative force. The choice is ours. Conventional nationalism was always, among other things, a defence mechanism. You asked earlier about geopolitics, the EU and Russia. "Lithuanian−ness" may be a rallying point for individuals to stand together against a foreign aggressor, and the struggle for independence shows that this can work. But in a defensive sense, competing memories are divisive and weaken potential resistance. Where a defence mechanism aspect of national identity is concerned, would it therefore not be better to build alliances on shared values −− such as freedom, equality, communality −− rather than on memory and ethnic ascription? This would strengthen potential resistance. On the other hand, competing memories can be turned into a creative force through cultural engagement based on mutual respect. Policies imposing "parity of esteem" from above, as in Northern Ireland, go some way towards this but may also create new iniquities in practice.

In light of what I said earlier concerning the size of identity communities, such communities are likely to be too small to withstand imperialist pressures on their own; what is viable as an ethnic group identity will therefore be insufficient for military defence purposes. It would be wise to de−couple the latter from the former as I suggested. That would liberate ethnicity and belonging, not for exploitative privatization but for creative, emancipatory purposes while creating strong protection through a community of values. The transformation will not be easy, and there will be times when, as in the current predicament of Greece, solidarity may require steps that are uncomfortable for all concerned. However, in post−Referendum Scotland there is a grass−roots movement that offers fresh perspectives on national identity, memory, culture and heritage.

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[1] Gregory Bateson, Don D. Jackson, Jay Haley and John Weakland (1956), "Toward a theory of schizophrenia", *Behavioral Science* 1, no. 4: 251−4

[2] Sigmund Freud (1930), *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag

[3] Ullrich Kockel (2010), *Re−visioning Europe: Frontiers, Place Identities and Journeys in Debatable Lands*, Palgrave

[4] Stanislaw Mucha (2004), *Die Mitte*, strandfilm