Is national culture still relevant?

Ist das Konzept von Nationalkultur noch zeitgemäß?

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Abstract (English)

With constant claims that we now live in a borderless world, where nation states are no longer relevant against the backdrop of convenient travel, the activities of multinational corporations and networking possibilities such as facebook and co., this article asks whether using the category of national culture in order to analyse interaction between members of differing nation states still makes sense. In order to do this, the article looks at some of the social systems and institutions behind the maintenance of culture and argues that although national culture is becoming somewhat less important as a method of categorising culture and is one of many, there are still some basic reasons why the culture maintained by nation states may be more stable than many would have us believe.

Keywords: Nation, culture, globalization, network, intercultural

Abstract (Deutsch)

Seit langem wird behauptet, dass nationale Grenzen bedeutungslos geworden sind angesichts der zunehmenden Reisemöglichkeiten, der Aktivitäten von multinationalen Unternehmen und der neuen Vernetzungsmöglichkeiten, die Facebook und Co. bieten. Dieser Artikel geht der Frage nach, ob die Kategorisierung Nationalkultur bei der Interaktionsanalyse von Mitgliedern verschiedener Nationalstaaten noch zeitgemäß ist. Um die Frage zu beantworten werden verschiedene soziale Systeme und Institutionen betrachtet, die zur Aufrechterhaltung einer Kultur beitragen. Obwohl Nationalstaaten immer mehr an Bedeutung verloren haben, argumentiert dieser Artikel, dass es immer noch einige grundlegende Gründe gibt, die dafür sprechen, dass die Idee von Kulturen als Nationen resistenter sein wird als viele vermuten.

Stichworte: Nation, Kultur, Globalisierung, Netzwerk, interkulturell

1. Introduction

Continuing globalisation and new ways of interacting such as online social networking mean that people today face an ever more diverse choice of affiliation and cultural membership. Social and professional networking platforms such as Facebook and Xing, actively encourage the assignment of their users to specific, standardised and multiple groups. We might therefore express our affiliation to any number of sub-cultures, ranging from a loose alignment with our *liking* a particular object, place, person or activity to strong affiliations with the involvement of, for example, political activities that might define much of an individual's life. In fact, it is now often asserted that many individuals possess „multiple identities" (e. g. Welsch 2009). With this, the subject of intercultural communication is facing a new challenge: Rather than the traditional idea that members of one national culture communicate with members of a foreign culture in the sense of hermetic, geographical, cultural units, intercultural communication in a globalised world is said to involve the crossing over and merging of many aspects of culture, thus creating a „transcultural" world (Welsch 2009). We are therefore faced with the question: How can we define and categorise the cultures that make up people's lives? To answer this we must of course address the nature of culture and in particular the importance of the concept of *national culture*, which is so commonly considered to be synonymous with culture. So, for example, if a Chinese acquaintance is invited to a dinner party, how much of this invitee's behaviour at that party can be attributed to the fact that he or she is Chinese, and how much to other factors, such as affiliations to a whole host of sub-cultures that could be professional, regional, gender-specific, generational, interest-group related or even a culture that simply relates to family, friends or the individual him / herself[2]. In all cases we are talking here about patterns of thoughts and / or behaviours that are caused wholly or partly by membership of a particular group of people. And this is where intercultural communication becomes complex: Even membership of a culture cannot be viewed in a binary fashion. We do not share behaviour and thought patterns with any one culture completely, but are *partial members* of many[3]. So where does this leave us with regard to the traditional view of culture in which individuals belong to one or a small number of cultures, often geographic in nature? The following paper will attempt to give some answers to this question.

2. Concepts of Culture

The primary question to be addressed here relates to the nature of culture itself. Ever since the study of culture has considered the *low* form of culture (i. e. everyday or *subjective* culture) as opposed to *culture* pertaining to classical disciplines and the arts[4], scholars from a range of disciplines have been trying to achieve a consensus regarding a common definition of *culture*. Most textbooks point out the vast number of varying definitions that have been suggested, before attempting to put forward an amalgamation of common aspects from these definitions. The problem here seems to be the differing standpoints of the researchers who propose these definitions. Thus, while psychologists might emphasise culture as an „orientation system" for the individual (e. g. Thomas 2003), semioticians are more likely to talk about culture as a "system of signs" (e. g. Posner 1991) and sociologists frequently envisage culture as a "social system" (e. g. Luhmann 1984). It is apparent then, that the definition of culture depends on the viewpoint and the objective of one's research, whether this relates to the functioning of society (macro-perspective), the success of an individual (micro-perspective), the communication process itself (processual perspective), or other viewpoints and objectives. These viewpoints and objectives are represented by the traditional academic disciplines, which have mostly developed into university departments (with the exception of *intercultural communication*[5]).

Thus, this distinct division of research into well-defined[6] subject areas certainly

hinders a common consensus of definition regarding the concept of culture. It is, however, also the complexity of the concept itself that prevents us from describing it fully.

Recent attempts to understand and define culture seem to have recognized both of these postulates. With reference to the latter, an increasing number of institutes and university departments have been created in the recognition that one discipline alone cannot attempt to deal with the vast and complex concept of culture. Modern science's tendency to break down complex notions into ever smaller units for ever more detailed linear analysis (at least in the *Western* developed world) does not always help us to understand the subject. This, indeed, would be analogous to the obviously nonsensical study of the precise properties of each neuron in the brain in order to try to comprehend how the brain functions as a whole. Thus, the study of culture is moving from the linear analysis of component parts, to a viewpoint which is more context-dependent (synchronic and diachronic), more system or network-oriented and more processual in nature (e. g. Rathje 2006, Bolten 2011). Seen in this way, the analysis of culture becomes a more holistic but also complex venture[7]. Such a viewpoint may thus require the imaginative ability of researchers as much as analytical ability[8]. Indeed, new analogies of culture are being developed, such as the comparison of culture with the cohesion that exists in the surface tension of water (Hansen 2009:6).

I would like to offer an analogy of my own: If culture is systematic, processual, context-dependent and caught in a continuous loop of information, then it seems that culture can be seen as a set of patterns of associations, ideas and attributions (schemata) that are activated in a group of individuals when subjected to the same contextual surroundings and stimuli. This appears quite similar to the maps of areas of the brain that are stimulated when subjected to particular contexts, as we now know from experiments in the laboratory (Spitzer 1999:95). Thus, a similar

input will activate *patterns* across the network of one's culturally determined schemata. Two individuals belonging to the same cultural group will therefore exhibit similar patterns of schemata (both structurally and qualitatively) when subjected to the same external stimulus. Assuming we could represent the schemata that they share, the result would be a complex, interconnecting web such as that represented in exh. 1. If we wish to view this network, we will firstly need to acquire accurate data. Whether techniques such as issuing as distributing questionnaires can reflect these inner patterns of the mind and their related interconnections is highly questionable. Secondly, depending on the way we view and categorise culture, we will ask different questions and thus only be able to *see* fragmented parts of the whole. So, in the diagram below, if we categorise culture according to national entities, and assuming that we have a verifiable data set, we will see, say, only the red nodes in the network. This will, however, never represent the complexity of all the red nodes, let alone the added complexity of say, the green nodes, which is what we would see if we took a look at culture from a different *angle* (again, assuming that we could gain accurate data, a complex issue itself). The number of ways of viewing culture is of course, endless itself (only three viewpoints are represented on the diagram through red, green and yellow). Through such a conceptualisation, we gain an insight into why culture is so hard to define and difficult to categorise. (See: Exh. 1)

Despite the difficulties involved in making the *concepta* contained in the cultural network visible, the conception of culture as it is shown in the diagram nevertheless allows for the multiple identities that we observe in the modern digitalised world, and also gives clues as to how a single individual can successfully function within very diverse cultural spheres, such as the civil servant who is also a rock musician or the teenager who identifies with skinhead culture, but can also function quite successfully at grandma's coffee and cake afternoons. According to the context,

the corresponding set of patterns of schemata will be activated. It is important to remember here that each person is a *partial* member of many cultures and thus in reality will take "patterns" from one cultural network and integrate them with patterns from networks of other cultures.

Our conception of culture has therefore changed from a static, object-oriented, homogenous and clearly delineated view of culture to one which acknowledges the dynamic, interconnected, systematic and multiple-layered nature of cultures, whose complexity can only be approached through analogies with systems found in nature or in the human mind.
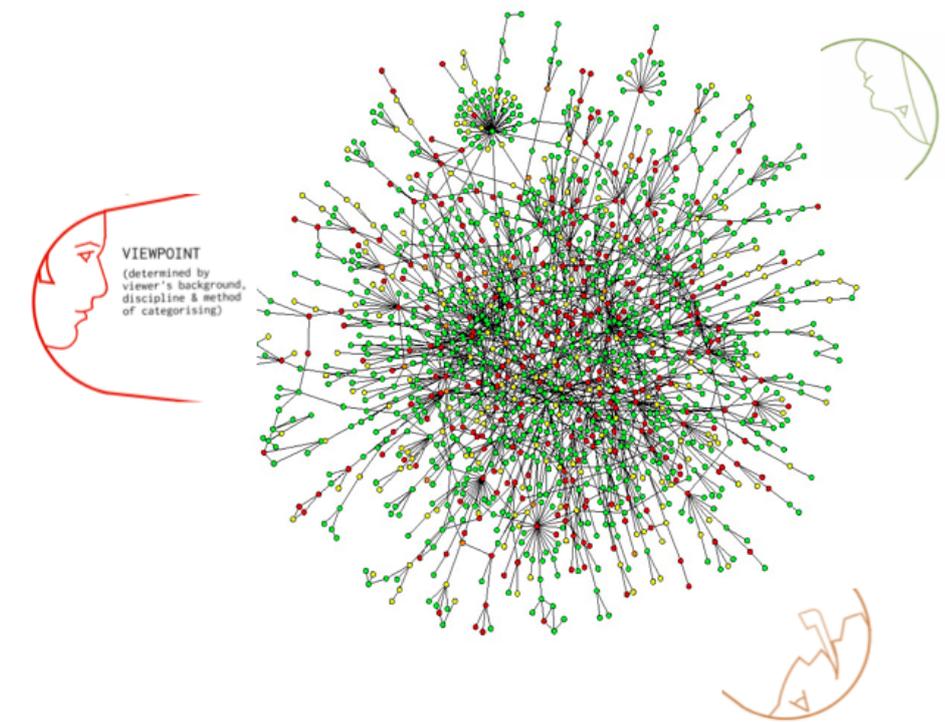

Exh. 1:   Different ways of viewing the schemata of culture. Source: Authors own illustration.

3.   Does national culture still matter?

Given this new situation, one might then ask whether one's geographic location still matters in terms of cultural affiliation. Indeed, it has been suggested that national culture is no longer relevant (e. g. Linck 2003).

There are, however, some important reasons why national culture still matters: A culture is influenced to a great extent by the agent or institution that disseminates information within that culture as well as the attitudes and influences on that agent (Münch 1990). Since the beginning of the modern age, the dissemination of information has been carried out mainly by academics, ("Wissenschaftler"), the Church and the State in various combinations. In the latter part of the 20th century and in the 21st century, this function has, to a large degree, been assumed by the mass media. Niklas Luhmann takes an extreme view when he states:

> "Whatever we know about our society, or indeed about the world in which we live, we know through the mass media [...]" (Luhmann 2000:1).

One might then contend that due to the now truly global reach of media organizations, that this global media culture would create a global communication culture. However, if we look more closely at Luhmann's three categories of mass media, i. e. news, entertainment and advertising (Luhmann, 2000), we observe in every one of these areas that it is still predominantly national media that a nation consumes. It is still, for instance, the *Tagesschau* that the vast majority of Germans watch when they wish to be informed about the world, rather than *CNN* or *BBC World*, and it is consistently the (less expensively-produced) local programmes that achieve the highest viewing figures (cf. Breidenbach / Zukrigl 1998:67).[9] Page impression statistics relating to the most popular websites in Germany (i. e. the websites at which people spend most time), show that German sites such as *StudiVZ*, *T-online* and *Bild.de* rank highest.[10] Many would contest here that online media has a far greater cross-border reach. However, even here, a recent study by Pankaj Ghemawat estimated that only around 16% of the online community's *friends* on facebook were located beyond their national border.[11]

Even in advertising, it is seldom that an advertisement is completely standardized (Moser 2007:124).[12]

Thus, despite widespread claims that we are living in a *borderless* world, nations, to the large part, continue to consume national media. This national media is crucial in maintaining continuity, enabling reproduction of existing ideas and sustaining the *cultural memory* (cf. Assmann 1988) of the population. Despite the slow erosion of national legislation through adaptation to EU directives and possible influence from international bodies (e. g. the United Nations), the coordination of social interaction is still regulated mostly through national legislative measures. This legislature has exerted and still exerts a considerable influence on the store of cultural knowledge, governing what is considered plausible, sense-making and normal (Bolten 2007:59).

For all these reasons, national culture is still relevant. In fact, one could say that national culture will remain crucial until such a time as the average citizen forms his / her view of the world through the consumption of *foreign* media[13] and until such a time as legislation becomes truly international.

4. The resilience of cultures

There are also three further factors that suggest that regional / national cultures might be more resistant to *transculturality* than commonly thought:

- Although it is difficult to deny that the industrialised world[14] displays a large degree of interconnectivity, it is important to examine the characteristics of this interconnectedness. Of Luhmann's main social systems (legal, political, scientific, religious and economic; Luhmann 1984), it is predominantly the economic and to some extent the scientific systems which display a real degree of interconnectedness. Religious, legal, political and social systems remain comparatively isolated, and it is these systems that coordinate and maintain social and cultural systems. Of course, every system influences every other system. However, the point here is that there are large parts of social coordination which do not display the connectedness that is claimed to be ubiquitous in the developed world.

- The key factor behind a culture's resistance to becoming completely transglobal, however, is the autopoietic[15] nature of social systems themselves: Social systems not only provide the store of knowledge to which a society / culture refers, but they also provide a way to interpret new information. Therefore, a social system, when encountering foreign information, does not understand a new piece of information in the light of its original context, but gives it meaning, according to its own system of interpretation, thus referencing itself. One could say that while a social system is structurally open (i. e. it clearly has contact with other systems and cannot be regarded as a container), it is functionally closed (i. e. the mechanism for interpretation does not come from the outside, but from within the cultural system itself). This is the reason why, for example, many aspects of U.S. culture can be integrated into German culture without too many problems. However, the meaning attached to these items is always adjusted to fit with the German cultural system. A BMW, for example, conveys a different set of meanings and associations in the U.S. than it does in Germany. In order to understand foreign information, members of a culture must reference its own patterns of interpretation and it is predominantly the national media that performs this task for the individual.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, we should be careful not to overstate claims regarding the interconnectedness brought about by globalization and the digitalization of communications, since:

- Many areas of the world have yet to experience the globalization process;

- The extent of cross-border communication is consistently overestimated (Ghemawat 2011:27);

- Many aspects of globalization have been brought about only by one social system, namely the economic system;

- Most citizens continue to consume national media;

- Cultures, held together mostly by language and national media, cannot be replaced, overwritten or transglobalised through contact with other cultures since they function in an autopoietic way, i. e. they reference themselves when looking for interpretation of new information.

Therefore, although identities are certainly becoming diversified, national culture is still an important way (although one of many) to categorise a certain density of similar schematic patterns in a group of individuals when faced with a particular context.

So what would the similarities be in the network of schemata in the minds of members of the same national culture? Many associations would be similar, and the value judgments regarding these associations would – although not necessarily similar – nevertheless be mostly taken from a pool of possible interpretations that are present within that culture (through media and reproduction of ideas). Indeed, it is the fact that value judgments are taken mostly from a pool of generally recognized ideas that makes this network recognizable. Thus, much of the network would have a recognizable character, although many of the details would be different. If we were to *zoom out* to view this network from afar, it would appear almost identical. However, viewing it close up, it would look very different indeed.[16]

In summary, just as claiming that cultures are hermetically sealed and geographically-based *containers* is clearly not an appropriate conception of culture in today's globalized world, it is also incorrect to claim that national cultures are now meaningless and that the devel-oped world is currently a transcultural entity without borders, for a whole host of reasons stated above. The recognition of the misleading nature of these two opposing extremities will allow us to examine more thoroughly the complexities of cultural networks in the light of the new, networked modernity.

Despite the vast complexity of cultural networks, we can nevertheless examine a small section of the network by specifying cultural variables, which might be national cultures but might also be other collectives such as regional, generational, professional etc. Again using the analogy with biology, in a biological system, a particular outcome is rarely caused by one single triggering factor, but by a combination of interdependent factors.

Thus, we need to examine the causal relationship between membership (or part membership) of cultural collectives and particular patterns of thought and behaviour. We can do this by examining a number of cultural variables in particular contexts, thereby avoiding mono-causal explanations and doing justice to the complexities of cultural systems. For example, in individual contexts, one might examine negotiations between an American and German businessperson in the banking sector. Further differentiation might consider the regional, gender, educational or generational differences between these parties. In this way we have a range of cultural factors that might influence communication between these two people. The extent of patterns of thought and action shared by both parties can be estimated, which in turn will indicate the amount of negotiation with regard to basic assumptions and communication procedure (meta-communication) that will be required. These types of analyses will always be a small part of the overall picture, but they will be relevant for particular contexts and will provide insights for future interaction between people with similar sets of cultural belonging in similar contexts and will thus be useful and insightful.

Finally, we will never be able to predict behaviour precisely, since not only do

we need to examine the *inputs* and *outputs* of a particular system, but we must also consider the dynamic nature of such a complex system. In complex systems input does not necessarily equal output, even if we have a good grasp of what the inputs are, and this is why despite the fact that we know, for example, that a particular person is Christian, lives in a city, has Chinese citizenship, is male, drinks coffee and likes to play golf, we still cannot predict his behaviour at a dinner party perfectly.

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Endnotes

1. The focus here is on interaction and thus intercultural communication. However, the same principles apply to contrasting cultures, i. e. cross-cultural communication.

2. See Hansen (2009) for a typology of cultures or „collectives".

3.   See Bolten (2011) for an idea of this „fuzzy" view of culture.

4.   The beginning of such a viewpoint could be said to have started around the late 1960s (Bolten 2007).

5.   There are, however, now a few (and increasing) number of university departments in this area, e. g. the department of intercultural business communication at the Friedrich-Schiller University of Jena.

6.   Each subject area attempts to define itself with unique specialized language. However, if unreflected upon, this language forces the scholar to view the subject from a particular angle that necessarily prevents a view of the entire complexity of culture.

7.   Cultural dimensions such as those from Hofstede or Trompenaars are of little use here, which should be apparent after viewing Exh. 1.

8.   Albert Einstein, when attempting to conceptualise the workings of the world, wrote: "Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth to evolution. It is, strictly speaking, a real factor in scientific research" (Einstein 1931: 97).

9.   A recent example of the regional nature of the entertainment industry is the entry into the German market of Rupert Murdoch's satellite television company Sky, which, despite its global structure, adapts its programmes almost exclusively for German viewers.

10. In fact, according to the IVW (Informationsgemeinschaft zur Feststellung der Verbreitung von Werbeträgern e.V.), there was only one non-German website in the top ten most popular sites in July 2009 (IVW 2009).

11. Cf. www.ted.com/talks/pankaj_ghemawat_actually_the_world_isn_t_flat.html .

12. One of the largest advertising agencies, J.Walter Thompson, estimated that Europe-wide standardised advertising would only account for around 5% of total advertising volume in the coming years (Breidenbach / Zukrigl 1998:46).

13. Although the very fact that the media might be construed as foreign will prevent this from being the main source of information that coordinates one's view of the world.

14. It is worth noting here that the majority of the world's population i. e. those belonging to underdeveloped countries is conveniently ignored in discussions regarding our borderless world. Indeed, while some talk of the existence of a second modernity in which nations no longer matter, there remain many areas of the world that have not even achieved the establishment of a stable nation state.

15. Autopoietic systems originally refer to biological systems such as cells. In reference to social systems it has the meaning of a self-referencing system whereby a system (or culture) references itself to give meaning to external stimuli.

16. This is an idea presented in Bolten (2011), which explains why we simultaneously recognise the overall character of cultures, but at the same time reject detailed categorisation of cultures.