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THE CULTURE OF COEXISTENCE IN THE *LONGUE DUREE*

On practising the ethos of the borderland

The contemporary culture of co-existence cannot be built on lies, wishful thinking or other baseless attitudes and ideologies, especially if they are realised through one-off, short-term and media-friendly events. The power of its authenticity should draw from a firm grasp of reality and care for long-term effects, and should be organically grounded in the everyday life of the community. Hence, it is best not to speak about resolving conflicts, but rather about an ability to live with conflicts, and instead of removing borders, to think about crossing them.

1. THE ALIEN – THE OTHER – ONE OF US

We brought down the Berlin wall, we opened up our borders, we popularised the Internet, most of us live in multicultural metropolises. And yet walls remain a familiar experience to the modern European. These are no longer walls running along national borders, between political systems or languages. The contemporary wall stands in the midst of society, on the same river bank, and it serves to divide confronting cultural identities. The ever-increasing proximity of the Alien, not outside of our world, but within the intimate space reserved for the familiar and the accepted, raises a new wall in which all our fears and inadequacies are sealed. We are realising ever more clearly that identity does not mean community, and that in our battles to preserve the former we have lost much of the spirit of the latter. The problem of modern Europe, which increasingly resembles an archipelago of separate cultures, is not the presence of diversity and differences, but that which Czesław Miłosz had called 'connective tissue' and on which he based his concept of the 'Native Realm'. This is why contemporary Europe must focus on coexistence, which drives a current of thought and action capable of tearing down yet another wall – not in a Cold War world of enslavement but in the face of the growing proximity of the Alien. By creating a European culture of coexistence we remake the Alien into the Other. Hence, an opportunity is born for the members of our communities, who speak different languages and have various faiths and cultures, to become

one of Us.

2. ENCOUNTERING THE OTHER

Encountering the Other means overcoming oneself. Empathy brings us into the space of moral choices and spiritual change. Most importantly, we come closer to acting on our heart's spontaneous reaction to another person's real life situation and needs. In the face of this reaction all previously established rules and beliefs, and even oaths made to uphold these values, are of secondary importance. What is more, if the situation demands that these rules be broken, it also demands the courage to confront the accusations of betraying ourselves and our community.

This response to our heart's call, the cornerstone of coexistence, is found in one of the oldest books of the Bible. In Leviticus 19,34 we read: 'But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself, for ye were strangers in the Land of Egypt...'. This admonition to Moses is brought up several times in the Pentateuch: earlier in the Book of Leviticus the love of the neighbour implies the 'children of thy people' (19,18); in Deuteronomy 10,19: 'Love ye therefore the stranger: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.'; and in Exodus 23,9: 'Also thou shalt not oppress a stranger ... seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.' The earliest version of the admonition, quoted first and written down in the 5th century BC, was, as we now know, based on sources as old as the second half of the 2nd millennium BC. This makes it one of the oldest, if not the oldest instruction in both the Jewish and Christian traditions for founding one's relationships with the Other on coexistence. It merges the advice found in the two remaining Biblical quotes which commonly has been, and continues to be read separately, and even juxtaposed, as representing two conflicting realms: the rational and the irrational. Thus, the first part of the admonition speaks of treating the stranger (the alien, the wanderer, the immigrant, the exile, etc.) as a fellow countryman, which implies equality in the face of the law and the right to be different (in religion, race, nationality, etc.). Today this legislative aspect is strongly underlined in speaking about mutual coexistence, by pointing to the constitutional guarantee of human rights, rather than tolerance and other humanitarian values which are difficult to rationally define. Leviticus does not ignore this aspect of coexistence, but it also does not stop there. Its admonition reaches further, towards love, which is an overcoming hinted at in the phrase 'as thyself' – to love the Other in this way means changing oneself, crossing the boundaries of one's own existence. This love is not given to us, like the love of the self, hence it can only be realised in the act of overcoming.

Overcoming is strongly connected with spiritual development, but also with the conflict created by the existence of borders and the guarding of those borders. Do we make laws, take oaths and outline borders only to break them and cross them? This conflict is seemingly irresolvable, as long as we treat the two sides of the encounter, the Self and the Other, separately, ascribing a different path to each one, and calling one's truth absolute. In our story of coexistence they are both on the same road, both fellow wanderers. Recalling the language of the people from the borderlands, who are used to living with others and not prone to erasing differences, we might say: their road is their border. That which brings them together and sets them apart determines their coexistence. A border sets us free not by protecting us from something or holding something at bay, but by offering us the opportunity of crossing it.

3. A TIME FOR COEXISTENCE

I understand the ethos of the border as a form of practising the art of daily life within a community whose boundaries are not on the outside, but on the inside, between citizens of various cultures. It is important today to analyse how this ethos was created in the past, in what circumstances it was negated or forgotten and what are the perspectives for its future rebirth in contemporary borderland communities.

All that I know about the the ethos of the borderland, I know as an inhabitant of Central Europe. I have participated in countless debates, initiated with the assumption that what is called Central Europe does not exist and, in fact, had never existed. It was an unmistakable sign the the authors of these words have spent their lives 'here' – within the unclear and ill-defined European territories which have been searching for their place in the world since 1989. Some considered Central Europe as only an idea, which itself was of but temporary usefulness. This was the case in disputes waged within dissident groups in the 1980s, when attempts were made to prove that there exists a separate, autonomous world between Russia and the West. In the eyes of many, the Autumn of Nations had invalidated this idea. I thought differently. Only after 1989 the idea of Central Europe became real to me, emerging as a new and fascinating project that could be realised. I am a practitioner of ideas, working in the element of borderland communities, away from cafés and academic disputes. What for them is a far-away myth, embellished with nostalgia and long-gone times, is for me the here and now, a new province to govern, a future to shape, a memory that cannot be forgotten. Central Europe for me is more of an ethos than geopolitics, it is a stance that juxtaposes uprooting with belonging, ideological mystification with a grounding in reality, the

complex of provincialism with the power of the province, and sharply drawn borders with a space of coexistence and mingling.

This space which I am thinking about here I have come to call the 'borderland'. In the context of Polish history and culture this verbal choice, in fact a recollection of an almost forgotten word, carries with it important meanings. It consciously substitutes the term 'Kresy', commonly used by Poles to mean the eastern territories of the old Republic. In Polish tradition this word has a strong emotional tint, associated with the greatness of the multicultural state of the Jagiellonians, the romantic myth of the exotic East, the trauma of war and a sentiment for lost centres of culture. An almost opposite feeling is shared by Poland's neighbours: for them 'Kresy' is the imperial domination of Poland, the assimilation of national elites into Polish language and culture, a paternalistic multiculturalism based on the rule of the strong, and the oppression directed against the emancipation and national pride of the so-called 'minorities'.

Irrespective to the strength of the Kresy myth in Polish culture, a counterbalance for it was created. A decisive role in this development was played by the actions and thoughts of the people associated with the magazine *Kultura*, whose editor-in-chief was Jerzy Giedroyc. Not long after the second World War, this group has declared its opposition towards Polish nationalism, the harbouring of historical grudges and irrational nationalistic myths, such as Poland with 'borders from sea to sea'. It is a peculiar phenomenon that such a school of thought was created by emigrants, who in Polish, as well as other Central European traditions, usually represented conservative and preservationist approaches, partial to cultivating poisonous nationalistic and Messianic fantasies, at times even capable of sowing such dark ideas on native soil. In the workshop of *Kultura*, toiled some of the greatest Polish minds and writers, including Czesław Miłosz, Witold Gombrowicz and Juliusz Mieroszewski. Mieroszewski, a political essayist, whose work sadly remains unread outside of Poland, was the creator of a concept known as ULB (Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus). This concept was based on the assumption that in the long term, Poles striving for true independence whilst fighting against communism and the Soviet empire, should resign from their claims to Kresy territories in favour of neighbouring countries, who would also become independent in the future. This meant not only accepting the 'loss' of cities which were symbolic to Polish spirituality, such as Vilnius and Lvov, but also becoming actively engaged in aiding and cooperating with Lithuanians, Belarusians and Ukrainians fighting for their independence. After 1989 this tradition gained a new life, and one of its modern mediums is the word 'borderland', understood as a mode of partnership.

A different issue entirely is the difficulty I encountered in transmitting the shades of meaning

of the words from my Central European vocabulary into other languages. Many a time I was forced to correct the misunderstanding of the word 'pogranicze' by explaining that it should be translated into English as 'borderland', in accordance with its local meaning, rather than 'borderline', which was the common practice. Due to these lexical problems I have abandoned translating this word altogether, accepting that in many languages it has no clear equivalent. Instead, whenever I say 'pogranicze' I simply explain that it describes a shared territory, which has borders running within it, its outside borders found 'nowhere', to quote Nicholas of Kues. Such an explanation helps to understand the ethos I am speaking about – a stance which values good neighbourly relations above manifestations of separate identities. Only such relations, as opposed to fervent patriotism, can serve to form a true community, described in the Polish language with another difficult word to translate: 'obcowanie' (this verb translates into English as 'to commune with', but its root is the noun 'obcy', which means 'alien'; in fact, the English verb 'to alienate' is almost directly opposite in meaning to 'obcowanie'; the author uses the Polish word to illustrate that the inclusion of the Alien into the life of a community strengthens it, and that his exclusion serves to question its existence).

Practising the ethos of the borderland is a form of approaching the Place, behind which lies the philosophy of journeying to the centre – the effort of the dispossessed wanderer who strives to obtain a truth he did not receive from previous generations, education or ritual initiation. The only chance for opening the Place to the very centre is Celan's Meridian of the soul. We reach it through empathy, which is somewhat ecological. Our care for the Place which we intend to understand and love must encompass its totality, every tiniest element, including that which we fear, and that which was previously alien and hostile. Such care is accompanied by the knowledge that a cutting off or poisoning of any element constitutes a threat to the entire ecosystem, degrading the Place. I do not mean here, as I have never postulated, that hate, prejudice and fear must be conquered. This is all too easy to propose, but such emotions are present in people, and even more intensely amongst those who survived neighbourly tragedies. Man is not capable of ultimately ridding himself of these feelings, just like it is impossible to construct a bridge once and let it stand – a bridge must be constantly built. Yet a person who is not a stranger to hate, prejudice and fear may begin to care for his Place, may become its keeper, and this promises a hope that he may think ecologically and long for citizenship in the centre.

4. BORDERLAND – NEW PROVINCE

These reflections are based on the experience and adventure of a handful of people who found themselves kicked out of the saddle of the old center by the events of the 1989 Fall of Nations, and who made their journey to eastern Poland and established, in Sejny, a small town near the Polish-Lithuanian border, an initiative called The Borderland.

The collapse of the Berlin wall in 1989 opened up a new space for development. The time of the province had arrived. I understand “the province” namely as a new space to be developed. On its own it may not have much to offer. Which is why those who count on quick profits are not interested in it. One cannot come to a ready-made province. Everything that is to be done has to be built from the ground up. All the province can offer is abandoned land, devastation, the wild, an atmosphere of dusk and anticipation. One can find a province in the elements of nature as yet untouched by civilization, or in the ruins and scraps of a civilized world -- but in both cases its specificity would be its virginity, its unique sense of taking the first steps along a freshly cleared path. The time of the province needs a generation of pioneers, practitioners, people with a mission, no matter how irrelevant or old-fashioned they may seem today.

Also the experience of The Borderland has been linked to such a space in motion - in our case it has been development of a part of what used to be the Jewish quarter in Sejny, a town with a multicultural tradition, inhabited today by Poles and Lithuanians. This small town carries the burden of all the tragedies, conflicts, destruction, and ideologies of the twentieth century. In this beautiful area, with its hamlets of Old Believers and Ukrainians resettled here during the so-called Vistula Action, one can find overgrown cemeteries - Jewish, Evangelical, Russian Orthodox - ruined mansions and palaces, abandoned monasteries, bridges leading nowhere, and dirt roads that end at the border. This area flows into the space of Central Europe, the second province that we have discovered for ourselves, heavily devastated, left outside the main current of world events, full of mysteries, unresolved matters from the past that arise from merging cultures, small nations, uncertain borders - dealing with the legacy of nationalist and communist ideologies, finding for oneself a new form, a new identity.

When in 1989 I set out on a journey to the East, I wrote down the following sentence from Czesław Miłosz's *Private Obligations* (Prywatne obowiązki): “As a Polish writer pushed against the wall by sluggishness and lack of sobriety, I have little choice: I appear to be either a follower and imitator of Western styles, or a creature more sagacious and more sober than my Western rival.” Just for the record, this “Western rival” was and is my partner in many important matters, among them the question of European integration. But he remains my competitor in the process of liberation from provincialism. I know that I have to battle him.

I have a feeling that many people consider the province to be a sort of calm, quiet oasis detached from the world, where one can escape from the nuisances - supposedly typical of life in the center. However it is precisely the province that creates an actual possibility of the penetration and co-creation of the world. This became obvious after the fall of the communist regime - the real was once again within reach, and not merely through the *idées générales* of the intellectuals, but through practice submersed in the stream of life of a concrete community.

This is precisely what we lacked -- the free act, rooted in the life of the community and evolved through a dialogue with it. Working in Sejny we were accused of producing publications considered not “law-abiding,” we were criticized in the media, some politicians spoke against us, one fought against us because of ideological differences and another because of simple human envy. But none of these were serious obstacles when met with the dynamics of the organic work. Contact with young people and dialogue between generations, work that attempted the reconstruction of memory, the revelation of the identity of small homelands, the borderland ethos and the broken bridges in Central and Eastern Europe, and finally the battle with our “western competitors” over originality - all of these efforts, these trials have cured us of fear and freed us from any ideological claws. We had no time to consider whether we were in the center or on the periphery. We knew not the isolation of artists who were living in the “alternative” or in “their own world” present from time to time to the people during their performance, concert or exhibit. What we were dealing with was culture based on participation and co-creation, socially engaged and blending artistic work with a wide educational program. What we were dealing with was practice shaped by the actual problems of the borderland and lasting not just for a day, but for a month or a year or even many years. Given our history over the past few centuries, shattered by sudden victories and fiascos that seemingly lasted for an eternity, such a move into a state of being extended in time, even if it were to be merely a beginning of something undefined, with no guarantees for the future, was by itself unprecedented.

The province, evolving by a free act, opens up new perspectives, in which life itself and its values define practice. The tradition of positivism, of organicism gains new meaning in such circumstances. Does it not have the same chance of coming into existence for us in the form of a new Goethe’s Pedagogical Province or Hesse’s Kastalia? In Central and Eastern Europe the time has come to return to *Bildung*. I would have difficulty finding a term which would be more appropriate and which could better define the spirit of the time of the province, and the challenges it puts before us.

At the end of our journey we arrived at a place full of unresolved matters from the past:

conflicts and taboos. Trying to come closer to the present reality time and time again we had to refer back to the memory, which turned out to be a crucial part of the contemporary world. But we were not creating a museum or a memorial. We worked with young people in order to shape our future and our own place in Europe. The unsealing of the place in which we lived rewarded us all - the organizers, the children, their parents and grandparents - with greater understanding and love for the people who once lived here. Of course it was not an entirely painless process and some tensions and grudges do remain. However, we concentrated on - as Czesław Miłosz noted in his *Word on the Borderland* - what is “in our part of Europe particular, concrete, painful, but at the same time life-giving.” In order for it to be life-giving we had to remain here and come closer to reality within the perspective of the temporally extended being. We had to discover the province for ourselves.

5. GOOD MEMORY

While travelling to Sejny, we were approaching a place full of unresolved conflicts, issues and taboos from the past. In order to come closer to reality we constantly needed to refer to memory, which turned out to be an integral part of the contemporary world. We were not creating an open-air museum. We were working with the younger generations to shape a new future and to find our own place in Europe. And as we, the participants of this work, children, their parents and grandparents, unlocked the past of that place we were filled with a love and understanding for the people living there and the land they called their own. Of course, our work was not without pain as some grudges and tensions were still present. We were working, however, on what Czesław Miłosz in his words about the *Borderland* called 'that which in our part of Europe comprises tangible, painful, yet life-giving details'. In order for these details to be life-giving we had to gain the trust of the inhabitants of Sejny without shying away from the tragic events of the past, at the same time focusing mainly on the good memories present in every person. We had to find a way, mostly through art, to excavate these memories and bring them into the light of present relationships.

Good memories and a positive language of speaking about the borderland are essential elements in creating a culture of coexistence. Borderland narratives about the past are dominated by traumatic memories and a negative language, concentrated on conflicts, grudges, defence in the face of danger, etc. This is motivated by the tragedies of history, especially from the previous century.

However, it also causes positive aspects of co-existing with others to be erased from collective memory, and leaves the community helpless in the face of expressing positive emotions and traditions. Tomas Venclova, a renowned Lithuanian poet once said about his compatriot from Vilnius, Czesław Miłosz, that he was a man dedicated to the word 'yes'. This may sound surprising, considering the fact that Miłosz's life led him through all the circles of 20th century hell. And yet Venclova touched upon the very essence of a man from the borderland, whose gestures never serve to separate or exclude but to embrace and welcome. It is thanks to this that he is able to establish a culture of coexistence.

5. THE BRIDGE OF COEXISTENCE

I understand the culture of coexistence as a process opening up the perspective of *longue duree*. Any attempt to narrow this perspective, to limit it to short-term expectations and effects can prove destructive. An imagination born of dialogue creates before our eyes a vision of the era we are entering. The challenge we must face in this era is the encounter of the Other. Philosophers claim that we are passing into an age which will complete the threefold cycle of the spiritual development of mankind. The new paradigm of this age will be the second person – 'you are'. It is shaped after the two previous ages: the ancient, based on the paradigm of the third person – 'this is', championed by Aristotle and valuing the mind and objectivity; and the modern age, with its first person paradigm 'I am', associated with Descartes, subjectivity and human will. Of course, these two philosophies are not yet gone – they are still present, permanently wrought into human consciousness. The upcoming age of the second person paradigm, however, stands a chance of completing subjectivity, objectivity, truth and freedom with the culture of coexistence, empathy and responsibility.

One way or another, by naming the upcoming age we acquire an understanding that our future will be largely decided by the problem of our encounter with the Other. An encounter which unsettles us with its potential for failure and endless cultural conflicts. Such a failure would bring about the defeat of our ability to integrate with each other, and of forming authentic communities in a post-modern reality. That is why we need the culture of coexistence, forming an ethos for those involved in its creation, and expressing itself in practical ways in our everyday relations. If this is to be possible, we need new cultural practices and new tools for constructing bridges of understanding.

The encounter with the Other is an act of construction. It is not given to us, and does not

happen on its own. Such an encounter is a craft. Those who practised this craft throughout the ages were frequently compared to builders of bridges. In the Balkans these people were called *neimar*, and accorded with the respect usually given to an architect who knew the secrets of nature and could impose order upon chaos. With time this name was forgotten, and along with it the secrets of the *neimar's* craft. Constructing a bridge became an technological issue. Old tools were misplaced, and the new tools which replaced them could not fulfil all the functions the *neimar* could utilise.

For too long we have lived in communities lacking the *neimar's* craft, where no schools of the philosophy of dialogue exist, and the art of constructing bridges is absent. This is not the time to consider what might have been if such schools existed in any significant number in the past, when we were trained, using increasingly more advanced tools, in the ways of destroying bridges. One might doubt the sense of the existence of Martin Buber's workshop for dialogue in Nazi Germany. Brought up in Lvov, Buber knew the alternative to living together in a multicultural city - there was no option of living separately in a modern society, so the only alternative was conflict with the Other. One might say that it was too late for his impractical philosophy, seemingly out of place in that time. Armies of journeymen already filled the workshops of ideologies which craved murder upon the Other, in order to entrench an endangered identity in its position as a binding element of the community. And although the number of deaths among people branded as class or racial enemies proved to be the highest in history, even more important was the number of guilty witnesses, participants of the binding rituals, who have formed lasting covenants. Such covenants, created in the murderous 20th century, have proven to be so enduring that we still feel them beneath the surface of our lives, usually unconscious of how easily they may re-emerge.

And yet, despite the resilience of the forms cast in the workshops of 20th century totalitarianisms, it is these workshops that now lay broken, compromised by their inhumanity and temporary usefulness. That which seemed pragmatic and consistent with the spirit of the times was unmasked as but a foible, which might even prove grotesquely amusing if not for the extent of suffering and destruction it had caused. On the other hand, the workshop of dialogue, established by such people as Martin Buber, which always bore the odium of utopian idealism, now shows us its amazing vitality and wisdom, realised by contemporary man as the art of life's praxis, expressed by such endeavours as the ethics of solidarity.

For the connection established by the *neimar's* bridge to truly realise the possibility of coexistence, there also needs to exist a real chance for breaking that connection. Separation and differentiation create the need for communication and the effort of establishing a connection. In the case of a bridge there is always the possibility of destroying it – we are aware of its vulnerability,

and our helplessness in the face of the destructive powers that nature and man can use against it. This may not be apparent in the physical image of a bridge. Georg Simmel wrote that 'a bridge in a landscape is usually perceived as a scenic element'. Which is why he ascribed to it only the meaning of unification, and he completed its symbolism for the truth about humanity with the symbol of a door, which 'demonstrates that separation and unification are but two aspects of the same act ... Doors can be opened, and because of this, when they are closed, they embody the sense of separation from whatever is behind them much more strongly than a wall.'

A bridge raised in accordance with the *neimar's* craft includes within it Simmel's door. We must remember, that the bridge might as well not exist, and that it may cease to exist at any given moment. That it exists at all, is the *neimar's* work, and the work of the living element he used to hold it together – its human caretaker. It is that caretaker who opens and closes the bridge, which on its own offers simply the possibility of a connection. It requires the attention of the caretaker for opening and closing its gates. This caretaker and warden once again stands at the border in the history of civilization. And once again so much depends on him...