

Beyond the nation? Reflections on design history

abstract

The concepts of the nation and national identity are analytical categories extensively used in design history. This paper highlights the complex and elusive nature of these concepts and suggests that their re-evaluation would be fruitful for the development of the design history discipline. In this respect, the idea of cosmopolitanism is proposed as a key idea to be explored by design historians.

keywords

design, nation, national identity, globalization, cosmopolitanism

Introduction

The nation has been systematically used as an analytical category by design history. Nation-based classifications in design history imply a localized character of design, developed and described within national boundaries. (Betts 2007; Korvenmaa 2010; Yagou 2011) Such classification has of course been valid within our world of nation-states. However, this approach may be questioned at a time when the idea and the concept of the nation itself are being re-evaluated. (Beck & Levy 2013) This paper discusses the nation-based approach to design history and suggests future directions.

The nation has been a central feature in the construction of modern states, the so-called nation-states. The institution of the nation has enabled the unification of diverse populations, sometimes through force, and the development of a collective sense of national identity. (Gellner 1983; Anderson 1991) Negative aspects of this process have often been emphasized, but it would be unwise to ignore the respective positive aspects, such as the feeling of belonging and pride that accompanies the formation of national entities. Following recent manifestations of globalization, certain analysts have declared the end of the nation; however, complex globalization processes have also ushered a renewed rise of nationalisms. (Grosby 2005: 118-119) Instead of the predicted death of the nation-state, contemporary reality presents us with international and transnational developments that may not be described in a simplistic manner: "[...] despite appearances to the contrary, [...] the nation persists as a pre-eminent constituent of identity and society at theoretical and popular levels." (Edensor 2002: 1)

In this paper, I discuss the use of national concepts in design history. By presenting two examples, I will argue for the need to move beyond stereotypical classifications of the nation in design history and embrace a more refined understanding.

1. Mediterranean, and other labels

The first example illustrates the common practice of attributing geography-based labels to design and the often problematic nature of such labelling.

Greece, being one of the Mediterranean countries, is often classified along and compared with other European Mediterranean countries such as Italy or Spain; common traits of these countries are taken for granted. Recent events related to the economic crisis have further encouraged a rather superficial bundling of Mediterranean countries. Although certain shared features may not be denied, they should not be allowed to become central in the analysis of design. A deeper examination of economic and political phenomena reveals more differences than similarities affecting the design domain in the aforementioned countries.

For example, although Italy is related to Greece through geographical proximity and mentality affinities, cultural developments in the two countries have been substantially different. Contemporary Italian design is directly related to early manifestations of Italian craftsmanship, going back to the humanistic phenomenon of the Renaissance artist's studio. The tradition of producing objects of the highest quality is deeply ingrained in both the Italian North and South, with every region specializing in different materials such as clay, porcelain, glass, marble, leather, cloth, wood, metal, and so on. The artist's or craftsperson's studio has evolved into a complex system, whose most significant feature from a manufacturing and organizational point of view was its industrial dualism, in other words the successful mixture of craft and high technology that characterized Italian production throughout the 20th century. Design development in Italy was founded on the assimilation of small-scale craft production into a wider system of industrial manufacture. In this context, the small-scale, family-based firm has constituted a key factor of industrial development, through the articulation of local forms of traditional production and their interplay with new, large-scale models of industrial development. (Yagou 2013) Such a hybrid system of modern industrial production based on solid crafts foundation was not achieved in Greece, a geographical area that was politically and culturally subordinate to the Ottoman Empire from the 15th to the early 19th century and experienced industrialization in a fragmented and incomplete manner. In this respect, the comparison between Greece and Italy is lacking validity and may be misleading.

On the other hand, an unexpected affinity presents itself between Greece and Denmark, a country not often associated with Greece in cultural or geopolitical terms. Like Greece, Denmark was an agrarian society of the European periphery and, until the beginning of the 20th century, could not be classified among the industrial states. Subsequently, underpinned by a highly developed cooperative system, Denmark achieved strong industrial production with emphasis on foodstuff and consumer goods. (Ranki 1986) In Greece, the dominance of an individualistic sociocultural environment and of clientelistic relations between citizens and state has led to a completely different direction. (Mouzelis 1978) Although examining Greece and Denmark in conjunction may appear at first an unusual or inappropriate choice, it eventually proves to be a meaningful comparison that highlights the multifarious possibilities of design development.

The respective juxtapositions of Italy and Denmark with Greece suggest that an unthinking application of geographical factors in design history is controversial and reduces the validity of historical analysis.

2. Exporting and re-importing cultural and national identity

The second example refers to the construction of national identity, a process that is far from straightforward or confined within the boundaries of a nation-state. Two cases of vastly different societies will be described in brief.

The first case is Greece, a nation-state founded in 1830 following a war of independence from the Ottoman Empire. The nation's identity was established on the adoption of ancient Greece as a founding myth that identified modern Greeks as direct descendants and cultural heirs of ancient Greeks. This was in fact a process of importing the relevant ideology from other European states: Ancient Greece had been re-discovered during the Renaissance and its literary heritage had been studied and admired by advanced European states in the centuries that followed. (Yakovaki 2006) Identifying modern Greece as a continuation of ancient Hellas generated the founding myth of the modern Greek state and even played a decisive role as a legitimising factor for its existence. (Koliopoulos & Veremis 2002) Almost two centuries later, the resulting ideology of Greekness remains today a powerful force influencing Greek national consciousness and directly affecting local manifestations of design. (Yagou 2011: 129-152)

The second case refers to design and cultural identity in Japan. The Mingei movement, conceptualised in 1920s Japan by Yanagi Soetsu, has spread world-wide since the 1950s, creating phenomena as diverse as mingei museums, connoisseurs and collectors, shops, and restaurants. The related theory, at its core and in the form of its adaptation by British potter Bernard Leach, has long been an influential "Oriental" aesthetic for studio craft artists in the West. If Orientalism is defined as the Occidental construction of the Orient, then Yanagi is credited with the absorption and re-appropriation of Orientalism to found his aesthetic discourse of modernity in Japan. Yanagi and his circles promoted mingei in the modern system of industrial capitalism, they constructed mingei as authentic "tradition", and thus generated a process of "cultural re-invention". Yanagi's nationalist modernism became part of Japaneseness and the rise of cultural nationalism in Japan. Kikuchi speaks of "oriental" and "reverse" Orientalism, suggesting the recurring and transferable nature of the system of Orientalism. (Kikuchi 2004)

There are indeed fascinating similarities in these processes of exporting, re-importing and adapting cultural ideas in Greece and Japan, across vastly distant and different geographical and cultural contexts. This second example has further suggested the hybrid and cross-fertilizing properties of networks shaping and transforming ideas of national identity, ideas that in turn influence design.

3. From national to cosmopolitan

The design examples sketchily presented in the previous paragraphs indicate the multiplicity of developmental and design phenomena; to understand such phenomena, it would be necessary to pursue detailed, in-depth case studies and avoid the traps of stereotypical and superficial labellings that limit and undermine design-historical understanding.

More generally, design history and the wider field of design studies are relatively new and still laden with problems of identity and direction. Margolin has recently argued about the "chaos in the domain of design"; he has also claimed that "we lack a design world that can not only coherently account for the diversity and complexity of design in the present but can also demonstrate through a broadened design history how we arrived at this moment

and can project how to carry it forward into the future.” (Margolin 2013: 405) Another commentator has spoken of “the insular world of design history” (Barnbrook 2013); it has also been emphasized that design history needs to become relevant beyond the design ghetto. (Heller and Ballance 2001: p. ix)

In support of these criticisms, I would argue that, as far as the concept of national identity is concerned, design history needs to avoid practices of stereotyping, and indeed deal with identity as a process, not an essence: a dynamic procedure of identity formation or identification which is continually being remade, a process of becoming rather than being. (Edensor 2002: 24)

An analytical tool that may prove useful along these lines is the idea of “cosmopolitanism”. By using this idea, Beck and Levy have recently argued for a “re-imagination of nationhood”, of a cosmopolitan reconfiguration of nationhood that overcomes the territorial fixation of the social sciences and shifts our attention to temporal dimensions. (Beck & Levy 2013: 3). They argue that “the sociological dynamics of cosmopolitanization imply an interactive relationship between the global and the local” (Beck & Levy 2013: 6) and that “cosmopolitanism does not negate nationalism” (Beck & Levy 2013: 9), but may complement it and act as the mechanism through which nationhood is re-imagined. (Beck & Levy 2013: 5-6). The idea of “cosmopolitanism” appears to be a promising analytical tool and may have important repercussions in the field of design; it deserves further attention.

Conclusion

The rate and magnitude of sociopolitical developments in the contemporary world require from academic fields to become more open and more receptive to change, if they are to be of any significance to the realities of everyday life. Design history needs to gradually overcome outdated classifications and embrace analytical tools which are more valid for the present. In this direction, the nation is not a concept to be discarded, but to be re-evaluated and re-positioned.

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