

## Beyond National Design Histories: Some Reflections

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### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> Negative aspects of this process have repeatedly been emphasized, but it would be unwise to ignore the respective positive aspects, such as the feelings of belonging and pride that accompany the formation of national entities. Following recent manifestations of globalization, certain analysts have declared the end of the nation and argued that it has become irrelevant; however, complex globalization processes have also ushered a renewed rise of nationalisms.<sup>3</sup> Instead of the predicted death of the nation-state, contemporary reality suggests that the idea of the nation remains strong: "[...] despite appearances to the contrary, [...] the nation persists as a pre-eminent constituent of identity and society at theoretical and popular levels."<sup>4</sup>

The nation has been systematically used as an analytical category by design history. Nation-based classifications in design history imply a primarily localized character of design production, which is developed and described within national boundaries.<sup>5</sup> Such classifications are certainly valid within our world of nation-states. However, the nation-based approach to design is being reconsidered, in accordance with the concept of the nation itself undergoing a process of re-evaluation. The present reflections aim to contribute to related threads in current design-historical discourse, by using as a starting point two examples emanating from the author's own work.

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the ICDHS 2014 Conference, *Tradition, Transition, Trajectories: Major or Minor Influences?*, held July 8-11, 2014 at the University of Aveiro, Portugal.

<sup>2</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, (London: Verso, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Steven Grosby, *Nationalism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Tim Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life* (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 24.

<sup>5</sup> Recently published national design histories include: Jeremy Aynsley, *Designing Modern Germany* (London: Reaktion Books, 2009); Paul Betts, *The Authority of Everyday Objects: A Cultural History of West German Industrial Design* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Pekka Korvenmaa, *Finnish Design: A Concise History* (Helsinki: University of Art and Design Helsinki, 2010); Artemis Yagou, *Fragile Innovation: Episodes in Greek Design History* (Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2011).

### "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 countries around the Mediterranean, is often classified along and compared with other European Mediterranean countries such as Italy or Spain; assumed 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.<sup>6</sup> Such a hybrid system of modern industrial production based on solid crafts foundations 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 much more fragmented and incomplete manner. In this respect, the comparison between Greece and Italy is lacking validity and may be misleading.

On the other hand, unexpected affinities emerge between Greece and Denmark, a country not typically associated with Greece either in geopolitical or cultural terms.

<sup>6</sup> Artemis Yagou, 'Style over substance? The reception of Italian design in Greece', *AIS/Design Storia e Ricerche* [Electronic], no 2, November 2013. <http://www.aisdesign.org/aisd/style-over-substance-the-reception-of-italian-design-in-greece> (accessed December 12, 2014).

Denmark presents many similarities to Greece in the sense that, until the beginning of the 20th century, it was also an agrarian society of the European periphery with very limited production base and could not be classified among the developed or industrial states. Subsequently, underpinned by a sophisticated cooperative system, Denmark achieved strong industrial production with emphasis on foodstuff and consumer goods.<sup>7</sup> In Greece, the dominance of an individualistic sociocultural environment and of clientelistic relations between citizens and state has led to a completely different direction.<sup>8</sup> Although examining Greece and Denmark in conjunction may at first appear as an unusual or even inappropriate choice, their juxtaposition is eventually meaningful in the sense that highlights the multifarious factors affecting design and the various possibilities of design development.

Therefore, the comparisons of Italy and Denmark with Greece suggest that the application of geographical labels and groupings in design history can be controversial and may limit the scope and validity of historical analysis.

### **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 the identification of modern Greek people as direct descendants and cultural heirs of the 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.<sup>9</sup> Identifying 19th century Greece as a continuation of ancient Hellas generated the founding myth of the modern Greek state and even played a decisive role as a legitimizing factor for the existence of the young and insecure country.<sup>10</sup> Almost two centuries later, the resulting ideology of *Greekness* remains today a powerful force influencing Greek national consciousness and directly affecting local

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<sup>7</sup> György Ranki, *Perifereiakes Evropaikes Oikonomies: 19os-20os Aionas (The Economies of the European Periphery: 19th-20th Century)*, (Hermoupolis, Greece: The Scientific and Cultural Foundation of the Cyclades, 1986). [In Greek]

<sup>8</sup> Nikos Mouzelis, *Modern Greece: Facets of Underdevelopment* (London: MacMillan: 1978).

<sup>9</sup> Nassia Yakovaki, *Evropi meso Elladas: Mia Kambi stin Evropaiki Autosyneidisi (Europe through Greece: A Turn in European Self-consciousness)* (Athens: Hestia, 2006). [In Greek]

<sup>10</sup> John S. Koliopoulos and Thanos M. Veremis, *Greece - The Modern Sequel: From 1831 to the Present* (London: Hurst & Company, 2002).

manifestations of design.<sup>11</sup>

The second case refers to design and cultural identity in Japan and specifically to the *Mingei* theory and *Mingei* (Folkcrafts) movement for the recognition and creation of folk crafts. The *Mingei* movement, conceptualized 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, a process of "oriental" and "reverse" Orientalism suggesting the recurring and transferable nature of the system of Orientalism.<sup>12</sup>

There are indeed fascinating similarities in these processes of exporting, re-importing, and adapting cultural ideas in Greece and Japan; their vastly distant and different geographical and cultural contexts have no direct influence to each other but offer insights into the development of cultural patterns. This second example suggests the hybrid and cross-fertilizing properties of networks shaping and transforming ideas of national identity, ideas that in turn influence design.

### **From national to transnational**

The design examples sketchily presented indicate the multiplicity of developmental and design phenomena and their nuances; to understand such phenomena, it would be necessary to pursue detailed, in-depth case studies and avoid 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."<sup>13</sup> Another

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<sup>11</sup> Yagou, *Fragile Innovation*, 129-152.

<sup>12</sup> The material on *mingei* draws on Yuko Kikuchi, *Japanese Modernisation and Mingei Theory: Cultural Nationalism and Oriental Orientalism* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> Victor Margolin, "Design Studies: Tasks and Challenges", *The Design Journal*, vol. 16, no. 4 (2013): 405.

commentator has spoken of "the insular world of design history"<sup>14</sup>; it has also been emphasized that design history needs to become relevant beyond the design ghetto.<sup>15</sup>

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.<sup>16</sup> It is significant that Europe, the continent on which nation states and nationalism were born, is the part of the world where nationalism is not as dominant in collective conscience as in other parts of the world and where the nation does not constitute the fundamental element of identity.<sup>17</sup> Nation-centered history obscures those other forms of individual or collective identity, other "scales of lived history".<sup>18</sup> Although national identity has been the primary mechanism that has defined belonging in the modern world and has set boundaries between "'us' and 'them'",<sup>19</sup> there is today a whole range of "'smaller", more negotiable identities (including virtual and even discarded ones) that define us, "the denizens of a liquid modern world".<sup>20</sup>

It appears then necessary to move beyond stereotypical classifications of the nation in design history and embrace a more refined understanding of how history unfolds, by looking at a wider context – not necessarily one of direct exchanges – and by identifying patterns that affect design. In the last few years, there has indeed been a tendency for the study of history "beyond the nation", a turn towards "transnational" or "global" approaches. In the field of design, a number of publications and initiatives have explored these issues and addressed possibilities and pitfalls.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Barnbrook, Comment during the Papanek Symposium 2013 - Emerging and Alternative Economies of Design: The Social Imperative of Global Design, University of Applied Arts Vienna, 14-15 November 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Steven Heller and Georgette Ballance, *Graphic Design History* (New York: Allworth Press, 2001), ix.

<sup>16</sup> Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life*, 24.

<sup>17</sup> Dimosthenis Kourtovik, *Elliniko Hangover (Greek Hangover)*, (Athens: Nefeli, 2005), 115. [In Greek]

<sup>18</sup> Erik van der Vleuten, "Towards a Transnational History of Technology: Meanings, Promises, Pitfalls", *Technology and Culture*, vol. 49, no. 4 (2008), 982.

<sup>19</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Identity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 21.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>21</sup> For example: Karen Fiss and Hazel Clark, eds., Design in a Global Context: Envisioning Postcolonial and Transnational Possibilities, *Design Issues* 25, no. 3 (2009); Glenn Adamson, Giorgio Riello, and Sarah Teasley, eds., *Global Design History* (London: Routledge, 2011); Ksenija Berk, Symposium Review of "Balkan Locus-Focus: Long 20th Century Visual Communication Design Histories" Izmir University of Economics (IEU), Izmir, Turkey (June 29–30 2012), *Design Issues* 30, no. 3 (2014): 92-95; Yuko Kikuchi with Yunah Lee, Special Issue: Transnational Modern Design Histories in East Asia, *Journal of Design History*, vol. 27, no. 4 (2014); as well as the conference series organized by ICDHS, the International Committee for Design History and Design Studies ([www.ub.edu/gracmon/icdhs/](http://www.ub.edu/gracmon/icdhs/), accessed December 12, 2014).

### **Transnationalism as a larger trend**

Two more academic fields, museum studies and history of technology, offer further examples of this historiographic tendency; the respective discussions outlined below may inform and germinate the history of design.

In museum studies, the concept of transnationalism has been proposed as a response to the problems posed by nation-based approaches. Meyer and Savoy question the recurring assertion that, as an institution, the museum has largely functioned as a venue for the formation of specifically national identities; they highlight instead the museum as a product of transnational exchange processes.<sup>22</sup> Rather than seeing museums as "mirrors of competing national cultures", they acknowledge "the existence of another, more complex, multi-faceted level - one that is marked by transnational cross-fertilizations."<sup>23</sup> They claim that, "aside from all of the national labelling and nation-related intentions, at the level of concrete activity the museums in Europe always had been a product of cross-border entanglements."<sup>24</sup> By drawing on the work by Patel, Iriye and Saunier, Meyer and Savoy argue that transnational history pays attention to the dependencies and the transferrals that cross territorial and political boundaries - the reciprocal perceptions and transmissions, and focus on the links and flows between people, ideas, products, processes, and patterns, while also acknowledging the continued relevance of the nation-state paradigms and the varying intensity of cross-boundary transfers over time.<sup>25</sup> It is crucial to emphasize the fact that national boundaries do exist and nations remain valid as points of reference for analysis, but that such boundaries are also crossed.<sup>26</sup>

In the same vein, a transnational agenda and way of thinking underpinned Tensions of Europe: Technology and the Making of Europe, a pan-European research network and program on the history of technology which has also been described as a "major experiment" and an exploration of new forms of collective research.<sup>27</sup> Although a number of risks await the historian of technology who follows the transnational approach, two core benefits have also been identified, the first being the investigation of topics previously neglected, underestimated, or inadequately conceptualized, and, secondly, a novel understanding of global or regional integration issues, but also of

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<sup>22</sup> Andrea Meyer and Bénédicte Savoy, eds., *The Museum is Open: Towards a Transnational History of Museums 1750-1940* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), back cover.

<sup>23</sup> Meyer and Savoy, *The Museum is Open*, 1.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>27</sup> van der Vleuten, "Towards a Transnational History of Technology", 975.

national and local history.<sup>28</sup> The Tensions of Europe project proposal had stated as one of its aims to study "Europe as something more than a collection of partly contrasting and partly overlapping national experiences"<sup>29</sup>, a formulation that echoes the emerging significance of "minor-to-minor" interregional/ community horizontal interactions.<sup>30</sup> These observations may then be related to the two examples presented in the beginning of this paper: transnational studies may include the comparative examination of geographically distant nations, on the basis that parallel developments in such countries offer a deeper and more nuanced understanding of design-historical mechanisms regardless of locality and culture. Complex flows, connections, and interrelations should be described to demonstrate the "enmeshment of national and transnational features"<sup>31</sup>; synthesis is required.

### **The idea of cosmopolitanism**

In recent times the discourse of the global has exploded, to the point that "the global has become commonplace",<sup>32</sup> which may lead to trivialization of the concept. Furthermore, the distinction between "global" and "transnational" remains tenuous.<sup>33</sup> Adding to the complexity of the discourse, cosmopolitanism is another idea that has been coined and which might prove useful to design historians. 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.<sup>34</sup> They argue that "the sociological dynamics of cosmopolitanization imply an interactive relationship between the global and the local"<sup>35</sup> and that "cosmopolitanism does not negate nationalism"<sup>36</sup>, but may complement it and act as the mechanism through which nationhood is re-imagined.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, given that all modern national movements tend to include both isolationist and cosmopolitan trends, cosmopolitanism should not be conceived in opposition to nationalism.<sup>38</sup> As van der Vleuten claims, "the nation-state remains a key analytical category that should be

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 986-988.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 976.

<sup>30</sup> Kikuchi with Lee, "Transnational Modern Design Histories in East Asia: An Introduction", 325.

<sup>31</sup> Meyer and Savoy, *The Museum is Open*, 14.

<sup>32</sup> Adamson, Riello and Teasley, *Global Design History*, 1.

<sup>33</sup> Yuko Kikuchi with Yunah Lee, "Transnational Modern Design Histories in East Asia: An Introduction", *Journal of Design History*, vol. 27, no. 4 (2014): 325.

<sup>34</sup> Ulrich Beck and Daniel Levy, "Cosmopolitanized Nations: Re-Imagining Collectivity in World Risk Society", *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 30, no. 3 (2013): 3.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 5-6.

<sup>38</sup> Daniele Conversi, "Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism," in Athena S. Leoussi and Anthony D. Smith, eds., *Encyclopedia of Nationalism* (Oxford: Transaction Publishers, 2000), 34-39.

contextualized, not abandoned."<sup>39</sup>

Furthermore, the idea of cosmopolitanism might be fruitful in dealing with the phenomenon of diasporas and their interrelations to national centers. The idea of diasporic influences is particularly salient in the case of modern Greece and other countries which have historically relied on emigration flows for their survival and reproduction, and have accordingly shaped their national existence and self-image.<sup>40</sup> In such cases, 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. Like other historical fields, 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. However, new labels such as "transnational", "global", or "cosmopolitan" should be treated with caution, to the extent they become themselves vaguely defined, often confusing, and potentially restricting categories of analysis.

What might matter more in our attempts to design-historical understanding is to become inspired by these analytical categories in order to define a new research agenda for design history. In this context, existing research questions will have to be re-examined and new research questions will have to be asked; this would require looking into yet unexplored historical sources, but also combining old and novel sources in ways that provide valid and valuable answers to the concerns of today. Last but not least, it is perhaps necessary for the design community to embark on this task through larger collective projects, which would bring together a range of multinational, multilingual, and multicultural expertise. Publications and initiatives mentioned in this text are promising stepping stones towards this major task.

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<sup>39</sup> van der Vleuten, "Towards a Transnational History of Technology", 984.

<sup>40</sup> Thanos M. Veremis and Mark Dragoumis, *Historical Dictionary of Greece*, (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 1995), 91-92.