

Homi K. Bhaba

The Location of Culture

By Teuta Cilic

I have attended a seminar on Post-colonialism during my last stay in Berlin, in February 2013. This seminar was embedded into a post-colonial sightseeing walk, held by Kwesi Aikins who is one of the founders of "Berlin Postkolonial". This NGO has the aim to show the current postcolonial influence in public space. Since this seminar I was even more interested in postcolonial theory. It was one of the reasons why I chose to attend the seminar "comparing cultures".

I have enjoyed reading the introduction of Bhaba's collection of essays that were published under the title "The Location of culture" in 1994. Unfortunately we have read Bhaba's words in German and not in English. Nevertheless it was a great joy to read his critical thoughts. Various homepages state that he "is one of the most important figures in contemporary post-colonial studies". One of my professors has pronounced criticism during class that "Bhaba is part of the American mainstream". Nowadays Bhaba indeed does teach in Harvard, USA. Nevertheless he grew up as a Parsi in Mumbai, India. This means that he was not civilized in the American-western way since birth.

I do not share my professor's position. From my point of view Bhaba's understanding on culture sticks out in comparison to the positions we have investigated in class. Furthermore I am convinced that "comparing cultures" may only be successful by keeping post-colonial theory in mind.

The English version of the preface of "The Location of Culture" states at the beginning: "Homi Bhaba sets out the conceptual imperative and the political consistency of a postcolonial project. In a dazzling series of interdisciplinary essays he explains why the culture of Western modernity must be relocated from a postcolonial perspective".

Bhaba's introduction to his essays is called: "Border lives: The art of the present". The title already implies Bhaba's focus on "borders" and "the present". From Bhaba's point of view "our existence of today is marked by a tenebrous sense of survival, living on the borderlines of the 'present'". Furthermore "we find ourselves in the moment of transit

where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion.” Bhaba underlines that our presence is marked by a sense of disorientation. I would go further. I would underline that our time is marked by fear of crossing borders and going beyond of the concepts accepted and promoted by western society. For Bhaba ‘beyond’ signifies spatial distance, ‘beyond’ marks progress and ‘beyond’ promises the future.

But what does it actually imply “to go beyond”?

The very act of going beyond means to turn one’s back to the “present”. Race, generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale and sexual orientation are nowadays very important for the individual identity and the “awareness of the subject position” in the modern, western-civilized world. Going beyond these categories and neglecting them would mean to create a space “in-between”. Bhaba coins the concept of the “third space”. This third space is located on the boundaries of in-between forms of difference and “overlaps the spheres of class, gender, race, nation, generation, location”. Bhaba claims that in this third space most creative forms of cultural identity are produced.

“These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood - singular or communal - that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.” These in-between spaces signify progress for the individual and the society at the same time. Bhaba is convinced that “political empowerment and the encouragement of the multicultural society come from posing questions of solidarity and community from the interstitial perspective”. The public sphere is encouraged and strengthened by the third space because it promotes pure solidarity between individuals.

Furthermore the third space implies the overcoming of our disorientation and our fear. Applying this concept to reality would mean to negotiate community interest and cultural value within a society over and over again. This process would be a current.

Nevertheless I ask myself as Bhaba already did: “How are subjects formed ‘in-between’, or in excess of, the sum of the I parts’ of difference?” From my point of view Bhaba’s

answer is not satisfying. He gives a couple of examples showing how people have already entered the third sphere. But a proper definition of the process is missing. Even though there are a lot of individuals who have already discovered the advantages of the “third space”, there exists a majority that needs categorization. In my point of view this majority chooses consciously the creation of borders for the sake of personal identity and the personal ego.

Bhaba begins his introduction with Heidegger’s quote: “A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its presence.” I do share Heidegger’s opinion as Bhaba does.

At the same time boundaries give security and stability. A person can hide itself behind a boundary as if it was a wall. An individual can shelter itself from the rest of the world that often seems insecure and dangerous. To renounce boundaries means to renounce security and comfort. To renounce boundaries means to be courageous and to overcome personal fear of the unknown.

Furthermore I do realize that for most people the concept of the “third place” is too abstract. Many cannot identify the advantages of this new concept of solidarity. Unfortunately our western-civilized society promotes in the whole world the advantages of being individualistic and a lone warrior. Most individuals seek to stick out, to be unique. Therefore they use categorization for establishing borders between themselves- the “I”- and the rest. Giving these categorizations up would mean to overcome ones ego.

From my point of view Bhaba is a revolutionist. He is far ahead of our time. He is right when he states that his idea “represents a radical revision in the concept of human community itself”. Nevertheless I am sure that change needs time. Bhaba himself states that community is a project that is vision and construction at the same time. Usually the vision is far ahead of its implementation. Bhaba as a pioneer has already overcome the disorientation. He has “gone beyond” and has entered the “third space”. I am sure that many of us will identify the advantages and will follow.

