POSITION PAPER

The 'Ornithologists', the 'Birds', and the Meaning of the 'Meaning of Europe': Keynote Address to the EAHN on the Occasion of its Tenth Anniversary

Daniel Bertrand Monk

This essay questions the unspoken assumptions behind the issues raised about the 'meaning of "Europe"'
by the organizers of the EAHN roundtable session in 2017 for which this was the keynote address.

Introduction

I'd like to begin by thanking the members and officers of the European Architectural History Network for inviting me to address this, its tenth anniversary meeting. I'm honored to participate, just as I am intrigued by the precise stipulations of the invitation, which tasked all of us included in this roundtable to engage in critical reflection concerning the 'meaning of Europe' in the constitution of a European Architectural History Network (Nitzan-Shiftan 2016).

Before proceeding with a few observations, I hasten to disqualify myself. Though originally trained in the discipline of architecture and architecture's history and theory, my own work relates to architecture only to the degree that it looks carefully at the way in which the *social artifact* rather than the *discipline* of architecture appears to view in other, violently contested, realms. And just as I am incapable of speaking convincingly about the status of a discipline, I'm also uncertain about my ability to join the question posed about the 'meaning' of Europe. As framed, the question of Europe tacitly identifies the answer with a right concept (as when one says, 'Europe means football', for example). However, as Roberto Dainotto's *Europe in Theory* (2007) clearly shows, the effort to search for the 'meaning' of Europe in thought constitutes a tradition of thinking that deserves examination in its own right. If Dainotto's aim was to historicize this same intellectual history, my own effort here will be to ask how one might estrange the un-reflexive 'familiar' that lies at the heart of our own efforts to problematize the meaning of Europe in our own labors.

Two epigraphs will help me to initiate this provocation
The first was uttered by the painter and serious bird-watcher Barnett Newman: 'Aesthetics is to artists as ornithology is to the birds' (Shiff 1992: xxv). In its original

form the statement was even harsher: 'I feel that even if aesthetics is established as a science, it doesn't affect me as an artist. I've done quite a bit of work in ornithology; I have never met an ornithologist who thought that ornithology was for the birds' (Newman 1992: 247).

The second epigraph, drawn from Pierre Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, raises a critical question about pre-dispositive judgments: 'Because the subjective necessity and self-evidence of the commonsense world are validated by the objective consensus on the sense of the world, what is essential *goes without saying because it comes without saying*' (Bourdieu 1977: 166–67, emphasis in original).

My hope is to bridge these two arguments, and nothing more. My suspicion is that the problem outlined (or rather performed) in the discussion about the meaning of Europe to the EAHN is doxological. And doxological in the precise sense given to the term by Pierre Bourdieu when he said that in doxa, the 'tradition is silent, not least about itself as a tradition' (1977: 167). In the present context, 'what goes without saying' is the way that epistemic regimes persistently substitute themselves for their object, and so perpetrate a species of 'pseudomorphosis' whereby the attributes and truths of the former are presumed to describe the latter (Adorno 1995). Because they 'lie beyond any notion of enquiry', the existence of doxa as forms of pre-predicative assent obligate us to ask whether ornithology preconsciously substitutes itself for the birds (Deer 2014: 116).

I'm going to try to approach this problem by way of the key themes of the EAHN's own 'Ten Years of the EAHN' (2016): 'Europe in geopolitical context'; 'architecture' (by which is meant the institutional/intellectual historiography of the EAHN's place in the field); and 'meaning' — that is, the meaning of knowledge regimes and the significances they produce.

Europe

The framing document 'Ten Years of the EAHN' (2016) refers to past programmatic debates concerning the network's European character. Was the term 'European' to

Colgate University, US
dmonk@colgate.edu

define the subject or predicate of thought? Did it refer to the scholars or to their object? The answer to these questions, the EAHN organizers surmised, presupposes a 'geopolitics' concerning the very 'boundaries' and meaning of Europe.

These questions and their answer have a pedigree. Read against the grain, the founding document of modern geopolitical thought *itself* shows us that the problems exhumed in our discussion are both real and irreducible. Indeed, at the very origin of geopolitics as a field, Europe was defined tautologically — that is, in the practice of geo-political anxiety over its definition and extent. In 1904, a British imperialist named Halford J. Mackinder penned a strange and disturbing essay called 'The Geographical Pivot of History' (Mackinder 1904). In part, Mackinder's observations were triggered by the Russo-Japanese war, which was experienced with shock by all who could under-stand its implications, even if they could only frame that understanding in the regressive jargon of imperial politi-cal authenticity. Japan, a small island nation in Asia, was able to subdue Russia — one of the great modern empires and a member of the Concert of Europe — by leverag-ing technology and mechanization into force multipliers (Venier 2004). The implications for any understanding of the territorial dimensions of world politics — i.e., what would become geopolitics — were immense. Why? Because the war signaled the end of what Mackinder called the 'Columbian Age'. By this, he meant that it would no longer be possible for any modern empire to assert its will against what he called the 'negligible resist-ances' of African or Asian others (Mackinder 1904: 422). 'From the present time forth … we shall have to deal with a closed political system', Mackinder argued. And in it 'every explosion of social force, instead of being dissipated in a surrounding circuit of unknown space and barbaric chaos, will be sharply re-echoed from the far side of the globe' (Mackinder 1904: 422).

If Mackinder haltingly presents us with the general con-cept of systemic rationality, that same rationality in turn redefines Europe in particular, and in ways that inform our invocation of geopolitics. Europe, in this new geopo-litical understanding, was just a question. Europe's exist-ence had to be understood as something contingent, a reality predicated on the fate of the Eurasian territorial land mass inaccessible to assault from the seas. This area, extending from the Volga to the north, the Himalayas in the south, and the Steppe regions in the East, Mackinder named the geographic 'pivot' or 'heartland' of world his-tory. He then argued that control over the pivot required the creation of successful buffers between the region that became Germany and the interior steppes of Eurasia. So, ironically, the future of Europe was predicated upon the existence of what would come to be called 'Mitteleuropa' (Murphy 1997).

From this new geopolitical perspective, Europe's past was equally contingent. Nothing about its identity or its necessity was self-evident. In Mackinder's account, Europe appeared as nothing more than a record of efforts to resist an 'Asiatic influence' emanating from the pivot regions (Mackinder 1904: 428). To the degree that a separate European identity had emerged in modern history, it was, Mackinder intimated, one premised upon the *practice* of 'forest' peoples defining a geostrategic discontinuity from the people of the 'steppes' in the Eurasian heartland to begin with. Europe, in sum, could only be identified by an anxiety over its identity. I'd like to suggest that this is a founding paradox of geopolitical thought that also extends into other normative knowledge about space, like architecture. Moreover, to the extent that the paradox just described may be said to have a doxic status, that is because epistemic regimes, like architectural history, have tended to treat the aporia just described as if it emanated from its own ranks (as if a nervous bird were the emana-tion of a tortured ornithology, in other words). And there is a distinction to be made between the success of pseu-domorphosis and its rationality. Whatever one chooses to make of them, the kinds of arguments introduced by Mackinder have enjoyed a long and fruitful afterlife in the creation of states and boundaries after WWI, as well as in the subsequent geopolitics of Georg Haushofer, Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Vladimir Putin (Brzezinski 1998; Kearns 2009).

Architecture

In 'Ten Years of the EAHN' (2016), this network asks how one would 'measure the authenticity of knowledge and the power of institutions in the field', chiefly in relation to the hegemonic knowledge regimes concerning archi-tectural history that were developed in the US. 'Ten Years' constructs a historiography of the field according to which the shift to a species of critical self-framing of architecture happened in the American academy: as the invention of history, theory, and criticism. In light of these transforma-tions, the EAHN asks, 'What is Europe?': a 'prehistory' or 'post history?'

These are important questions. But what if the historiographical trajectory is a bit different than the one suggested in 'Ten Years'? Let me sketch out an alterna-tive version. If nothing else, this one will help us toward a discussion of doxologies that are at once structured and structuring architectural histories. (And here, I freely admit that we are wandering dangerously into the sphere of autobiography — or at least toward a prosopography at whose periphery I, among others here, am to be found.)

It seems to me that the 'theoretical' turn in postmodern architectural thought is, in part, a sociological fact, and more than that: the consequence of two related migra-tions. (In this sense I'm suggesting a convergence of a sociology of knowledge with geopolitical events.) The turn toward an orientation of contemporary history, the-ory, and criticism was, first of all, a wresting of 'qualifica-tion' from the discipline of art history. And it happened at roughly the same moment as horizons of formalist legiti-mation within the so-called 'New Criticism' came under assault in literary theory (Lentricchia 1981). We're talking about a historical moment characterized by the 'linguis-tic turn' in all cultural analysis. But in architecture this also represented an assault on Panofsky, Wittkower, and the other academic dons who sustained a Teutonic hold on the field via the imposition of the very distinctions

that would define the analysis of architecture to begin with (Bourdieu 1984). Two related alternatives presented themselves to view: The first was the structuralist turn that was, if you look closely, associated with a cadre of Argentinian architects, many of whom necessarily fled Buenos Aires for political reasons in 1962 and 1967, and first migrated to institutions of higher learning in France and Italy (Potash 1969; Miller 1999). A number of these 'specific intellectuals' then colonized American academia as followers of Eco, Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, and Althusser. The principal venue for their intellectual efforts would be the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies (IAUS), in New York, and eventually, its publication outlet, the journal *Oppositions*. Mario Gandelsonas, Diana Agrest, Jorge Silvetti, Rodolfo Machado, Cesar Pelli, Emilio Ambasz, and others effectively interpolated a structuralist sensibility in the teaching of American architects. (Might it be more proper, then, to ask about the 'meaning of Argentina' to the 'meaning of Europe' in the EAHN?)

Influenced in part by the New Left, a second and complementary stream also divided architectural history from the academic field of art history by highlighting the features of architecture that rendered it a *fait social* — chiefly in technological transformations and the political economies that established them, for example. This was an approach that would be developed by a cadre of English architects loosely connected to the postwar British polytechnics who experienced the building of the postwar welfare state. Among these were Reyner Banham, Alan Colquhoun, Robert Maxwell, Anthony Vidler, and Kenneth Frampton, some of whom also gravitated to the IAUS. (Some of these thinkers were also influenced by the social history of Carl Schorske and the historical sociology of Charles Tilly.) Together, the Argentine and British architects disenchanted architecture's enchantment with the work of an academic elite that had largely circumscribed the study of architectural history to the analysis of monuments'; 'what had gone without saying no longer went without saying'. The independence of architectural history may have emerged as a feature of the American academy, but it was advanced in what amounts to an intercontinental *salon de refusés.*

The fate of that same disenchantment of architectural distinction is known to everyone in the field today. The brush that sweeps away leaves its traces. Once emancipated, the field of architectural history has — to the best of my understanding — framed constitutive contradictions in its own thought, chiefly as a struggle between autonomy and contingency. A struggle that is, again, doxological in its normative self-evidence. You hear it all the time (or at least I have, recently, in arguments with architecture editors) in the insistence that what one says can't be true because otherwise architecture would have nothing proper to itself, or conversely, in the mouths of the same editors, that what one says can't be true because if one is right then architecture would be socially irrelevant. One is left wondering, once again, if this bait-and-switch of reason isn't how a species of 'ornithology substitutes itself for the birds'.

This leads us, finally, to the question of dominant paradigms raised in the reference document of the EAHN, or to the heading of 'Significance'.

Significance

This is where we finally confront the problem of ornithology and the birds, as Barnett Newman framed it, and as Adorno worked through it. Indeed, the last great treatise on aesthetics in modern history, Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (1997), is precisely oriented toward the problematic substitution of aesthetics for its object, and toward the hypostasis of that substitution into the way of the given world. In what follows, I need to make absolutely clear that my understanding of this remarkably difficult text is guided, in part, by the brilliant work of Robert Hullot-Kentor, who has not only translated Adorno into English, but also interpreted Adorno's oeuvre so gracefully that his own words constitute a meaningful contribution to critical theory in their own right (Hullot-Kentor 2006).

I suspect that a commonplace experience of dislocation in the framing of architectural history's relation to Europe on geographic, historiographic, or semantic grounds actually points to a forgetting of architecture's 'externality to its object' (Hullot-Kentor 1997: xii). (By 'architecture', I'm referring to the academic and professional disciplines.) Our arguments about the self-evidence of a lost self-evidence of meaning (and this is what our questions today are really about) tacitly lay the fault on the concept of architecture, or architectural history, because these now 'fail to achieve the standard of experience they purport to treat' (Hullot-Kentor 1997: xii).

Confronted with this putatively self-evident loss of art's self-evidence, Adorno suggested that aesthetics resorted to one of two positions that should already be familiar from the architectural examples I just offered. It either arrogated to itself the right to decide what is tasteful on the basis of criteria it wouldn't and couldn't divulge — these are the 'nobility of the senses' arguments that Bourdieu undid in his own *Distinction* (1984) — or aesthetics made a fetish of the experience of art. 'It has to be felt to be understood', so the argument goes. In either instance, the premises of autonomy and contingency each constitute a false but successful refuge, because in each of them an ornithology of beauty supplants the beauty in birds.

In his work, by contrast, Adorno sought to upend this condition by showing what aesthetics looks like from the standpoint of art. As Hullot-Kentor reminds us, an aphorism about music pointed the way toward Adorno's critique: 'We don't understand music. Music understands us' (Hullot-Kentor 1997: xii). To take such a standpoint seriously would mean working through the reified categories of aesthetics themselves, and understanding aesthetics' concept of art as the 'artwork' it generates.

I'll close with a few questions. What concrete or 'pragmatic' outcomes would this species of reversal yield in our own work, if it were to be taken up as the task of architectural history? In other words, what would an architectural history that took such provocations into account look like? It seems to me that two alternatives present themselves. The first would be a history of architectural history, now understood as a practice tasked with qualifying what constitutes architecture to begin with. The second would be a history that discriminates against history's normative

discriminations. What would a history of architecture look like, in other words, if it named no architects, no monuments, and showed anything *but* the elements of the given canon? It seems to me that in either instance, we might be doing justice to a condition in which 'what is essential goes without saying because it comes without saying'.

Competing Interests
The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

Adorno, TW. 1997. *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno, G and Tiedemann, R (eds.). Trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Adorno, TW and **Gillespie, S.** 1995. On Some Relationships Between Music and Painting. *The Musical Quarterly*, 79(1): 66–79. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/mq/79.1.66

Bourdieu, P. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Trans. by Richard Nice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511812507

Bourdieu, P. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Brzezinski, Z. 1998. *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*. New York: Basic Books.

Dainotto, R. 2007. *Europe (in Theory)*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Deer, C. 2014. Doxa in Grenfell. James, M (ed.), *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts*, 114–25. Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge.

Hullot-Kentor, R. 1997. Translator's Introduction. In: Adorno, TW, Adorno, G and Tiedemann, R (eds.), *Aesthetic Theory*, xi–xxi. Trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Hullot-Kentor, R. 2006. *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Kearns, G. 2009. *Geopolitics and Empire: The Legacy of Halford Mackinder*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199230112.001.0001

Lentricchia, F. 1981. *After the New Criticism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mackinder, HJ. 1904. The Geographical Pivot of History. *The Geographical Journal*, 23(4): 421–37. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/1775498

Miller, N. 1999. *In the Shadow of the State: Intellectuals and the Quest for National Identity in Twentieth-Century Spanish America*. London, New York: Verso.

Murphy, DT. 1997. *The Heroic Earth: Geopolitical Thought in Weimar Germany, 1918–1933*. Kent: Kent State University Press.

Newman, B. 1992. *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, O'Neill, JP (ed.). Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

Nitzan-Shiftan, A. 2016. Ten Years of the EAHN. Private Communication. Chair's Directive to Roundtable Participants, 10th EAHN Congress, 1 March.

Potash, RA. 1969. *The Army & Politics in Argentina*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Shiff, R. 1992. Introduction. In: Newman, Barnett 1992 *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, O'Neill, JP (ed.), xiii–xxviii. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

Venier, P. 2004. The Geophysical Pivot of History and Early Twentieth Century Geopolitical Culture. *Geographical Journal*, 170(4): 330–336. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0016-7398.2004.00134.x