

## Book Review: The Field of Culture at Historical Crossroads

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Book Review:

## The Field of Culture at Historical Crossroads

Leeni Hansson\*

*Nullindate kultuur: Teise laine tulemine [Culture of the Early 2000s I: The Coming of the Second Wave]* and *Nullindate kultuur: Põlvkondlikud pihtimused [Culture of the Early 2000s II: Generational Testimonies]* by Aili Aareleid-Tart & Anu Kannike (eds.), 2012, Tartu: Tartu University Press.

The years following the collapse of the Soviet Union and re-establishment of independent statehood in Estonia brought about radical transformations of different fields in Estonian society. However, academic discussions on the period of transformations have mostly been focused either on the outcomes of the macro level political and economic reforms of the 1990s or on the changes in the demographic structure of the country. Up to now, much less attention has been paid to the impact of the post-Soviet transitions and radical macro level changes that accompanied the transitions in the field of culture.

The two pre-reviewed collections of articles, written by social scientists of Tallinn University and the University of Tartu and published under a common title *Culture of the Early 2000s*, take a step towards providing a better understanding of the impact of radical socio-economic changes on different aspects of culture in a former socialist country.

The first volume, titled *Culture of the Early 2000s I: The Coming of the Second Wave*, contains research articles that deal with more general tendencies of institutional change related to transitions from one social order to another, and their impact on the cultural field. Compared to the first wave of changes that took place in the first decade of post-socialist transition, i.e. the 1990s, the authors call the culture of the period of the early 2000s a second wave of post-socialist culture that, according to the compiler of the book Aili Aareleid-Tart, “is characterized by the plurality of memory regimes that at times causes conflicts /.../, but in general terms develops in the relative isolation of separate memory communities” (p.8).

The articles of the first volume cover a wide range of topics from changes in the meaning and interpretation of culture, basic values, and perception of new technologies, to issues of education, home-building mechanisms, popular movements and collective actions like ‘Let’s do it!’. The articles are mostly focused on the early 2000s, but for comparative purposes several authors also take a retrospective look at the 1990s, comparing Estonian data with those of neighboring countries.

There are three articles in the first volume I would like to highlight. In her article, Lauristin argues that among Estonian people the rapid spread of new media and active participation in the digital community have resulted in the growing popularity of cosmopolitan ideas and new sub-cultures, especially among the representatives of the younger generation. At the same time, the author shows that the basic patterns of culture, the motives of consumption of culture, as well as the forms of participation are still rather traditional. The main question for the author seems to be whether it is possible for the younger generation to also find its way to the basic values of their own national culture through virtual communities. In their contribution, Tart, Sõmer and Lilleoja argue that the value systems of Estonian people are still in the transition phase. They also direct attention to the differences in the values of ethnic Estonians and those of Russian speakers, with the values of ethnic Estonians being closer to those characteristic of the Nordic countries, whereas the values of the Russian speakers are closer to those in Russia. Thus, based on the differences in the basic values, in

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Estonia we can speak of two ethnic-linguistic communities that are also characterized by different cultural values. The joint article by Raudsepp and Rämmel looks at the acceptance of new technologies by Estonian people. The authors argue that due to a rational and materialistic way of looking at things and due to a lack of religious restrictions Estonian people are likely to easily accept new technologies and R&D achievements. The main problem for the Estonian people seems to be a possible cutback in personal privacy that might result from the implementation of new technologies.

Thus, the articles of the first volume of *Culture of the Early 2000s* demonstrate that Estonian people have been rather flexible in adapting to the radical social changes, both in the previous century, characterized by many dramatic turning points, as well as at the turn of the 21st century, characterized by globalization and a return to the European community. However, although Estonia is often recognized as the forerunner among the post-socialist countries in many fields, the authors are still rather precautious in forecasting the future of the culture, as there is a danger that because of being like a laboratory for testing imported hedonistic and consumer lifestyles, sub-cultures and new technologies, Estonia might have too little space for sustainable development of its own national culture.

The articles of the second volume of *Culture of the Early 2000s*, subtitled *Generational Testimonies*, focus on the perception of historical time by 'separate memory communities', i.e. by representatives of different generations and different population groups. While the articles in the first volume were mostly based on the secondary analysis of survey data, the articles in the second volume are based on biographical and focus group interviews with representatives of various generations who should share common life experiences and historical memories. The second book starts with an introductory article that includes theoretical discussion about generations and generational time (Aarelaid-Tart). The successive articles provide insight into the plurality of memory regimes of different generations – those born in the 1920s and brought up in the period of the 'first Republic' (Raudsepp), those who were born directly after the WWII in the 1940s and graduated from the university in the early 1970s (Aarelaid-Tart), those who were born in the 1960-1970s and started their careers already in an independent state and took advantage of the new open world - usually called the generation of winners (Saar), and the children of independence, i.e. those born in the late 1980s (Schneider). The distinctions of the cultural memories of the Russian-speaking minority group are discussed in the articles of Pärt and Hatšaturjan.

Taking transformational time as the research basis, the authors develop a conceptual understanding of the relationship between macro level social changes and generational memory patterns and consciousness. The keywords that the theoretical framework is based on are: external determinants, internal freedom, and openness to dialogue. The central theme in the articles is the importance of the wider social context and the relevance of the character of the 'transformation' framework in shaping personal destinies and cultural memories. The authors particularly address the issues of turning points, opportunities and constraints, i.e. how within a generation the outcomes are justified and explained as depending on the choices people made within the internal and external constraints and opportunities available to them.

The articles gathered in the second volume of *Culture of the Early 2000s* illustrate how in different generations and social groups the experience of transitions led to surprising and often contradicting cultural memories. Furthermore, the authors stress that within a generation historical events and transitions could be interpreted in a different way, and instead of the black-and-white basic memory pattern characteristic of the 1990s, today we could speak of more colorful memory patterns. The duality of transformation is particularly evident in the formation of new identities, based on self-reliance in the period of uncertainty that is an inevitable part of life in a period of transition. The authors portray how the overall framework of transition forced either negative or positive interpretations on people even though the reality was different for them.

To conclude, the two volumes of the *Culture of the Early 2000s* are exciting, easy-to-read and thought-provoking collections of articles, which cover a wide range of topics and offer a much broader understanding of a key period in recent Estonian history than the typical economic discourse. Furthermore, the articles raise challenging and profound questions about the situation of culture in former socialist societies in general, and how the culture's rapidly changing pace alters previously stable attitudes and identities among different population groups. On the one hand, the wide range of topics covered is an advantage of the book. On the other hand, as so often with collections of articles, both volumes are somewhat fragmented, the articles are of different quality and some of the articles included cover issues only loosely related to the main topic. Nevertheless, the two volumes of the *Culture of the Early 2000s* will be of great value to everyone interested in social change in general, and in its impact on the field of culture, including political scientists, historians, as well as sociologists.

However, I have one little reservation. The articles are in Estonian, and it seems to me that the studies concerning the interplay of macro level transformation and culture would have been of great interest also to a much broader audience than the Estonian-speaking academic community. Thus, comprehensive English summaries of the articles attached to the volumes would have definitely been of great advantage.

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