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Genius loci – and man's hegemonic ambitions

Although we live in space, most of us experience only those fragments which relate immediately to our professional life or daily occupations. *Genius loci* is a way of putting our experience of space together by focusing on its true meaning for our existence. Looking at a landscape we realize that the radical distinction between “man-made” and “natural” has undergone a considerable change. As Mircea Eliade put it, landscape demonstrates that man has taken possession of time. Today, after centuries of man's interference in the natural order, the landscape has become increasingly a set of man-made artefacts imposed upon the natural scene, and the secret of the world's future seems to consist in his ability to come to terms with a situation in which man's power seems to be hegemonic. Thus, *genius loci*, represented in ancient mythologies by nymphs or gods as protectors of a given space, stands for a wider horizon of reflection upon places, a reflection not limited to mere geographical description but probing the social, political, religious, and cultural significances of a given *locus*.

It also tries to accommodate and deal with human emotional involvement in the spatial circumstances of life since as Marjorie Grene wisely observed, through *genius loci* we become aware of

the fact that our being-in-space cannot be conceived of in terms of mere topography or even epistemology. As she says, our being-in-space is not gnostic but, rather, pathic, which recalls the Greek *pathein*, *genius loci* tries to name and approach a particular kind of bonding of man with the world which recognizes the structure of our emotional commitment, a structure which necessarily includes pain and suffering. Thus, *genius loci* is a cluster of phenomena – geographical, political, social and cultural – which constitute a dense network of relationships that Vidal de la Blache referred to as chronological.

Thus there are two fundamental reasons which explain the urgency of research on the problem of *genius loci*. First, as a manner of relating man to the world, *genius loci* describes a mode of ordering our individual lives and experiences but also helps to understand our social, economic and political circumstances. Secondly, it requires a multidisciplinary approach in order to do justice to the intricacies of the problem and take into consideration its international and universal character.

Tadeusz Sławek