

## A vision of European landscapes: an interview with Kenneth Olwig

Hans Renes<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Utrecht University, Utrecht, the Netherlands

<sup>2</sup> Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Corresponding author: Hans Renes (j.renes@uu.nl)

Received 12 November 2019 | Accepted 26 November 2019 | Published 8 May 2020



Kenneth Robert Olwig (1946) was born and raised on Staten Island in New York City, but much of his work is on the landscapes of Europe, particularly Scandinavia, the region from where his family came, as well as North America. He wrote a PhD in geography at the University of Minnesota, supervised by Yi-Fu Tuan, on the transformation of Denmark's Jutland heaths 1750-1950 (a revised version was published in 1984).<sup>1</sup>

Much of his best-known work is on the concept of landscape, taking a philological approach using historical sources and etymological methods. Though continental European geographers, and others, have long used the term landscape almost as a synonym for region, in English the term has primarily meant scenic space since the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. During the 1980's, cultural geographers such as Denis Cosgrove emphasized the aesthetic aspect

of landscape and saw landscape as a mode of seeing deriving from the Italian Renaissance development of the techniques of central point perspectival representation based on the methods used to survey and map land.<sup>2</sup> This quintessentially English view soon became the new orthodoxy. In an influential article in 1996, Olwig took an intermediate position. He argued that, prior to the development of the scenic sense of landscape in the early 1600's, landscape – variously spelled as e.g. *landskap* (Swedish) or *Landschaft* (German) – referred to polities and the areas or regions that they shaped largely under the “substantive” rights and duties mandated by their customary laws and representative legal systems.<sup>3</sup> In later publications he deepened the argument<sup>4</sup> and emphasized ever more the legal sense of landscape, defined by rights and duties.<sup>5</sup>

Olwig has worked at Scandinavian universities in Denmark, Norway and most recently at the Department of Landscape Architecture, Planning and Management of the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences in Alnarp, Sweden. Though he officially retired in 2013, he still teaches, lectures internationally and publishes as an emeritus professor. Recently a collection of his articles on the meanings of landscape was published.<sup>6</sup>

Q: By way of Introduction: please give us a short description of your own involvement in landscape studies; your background and the development of your ideas.

A: You introduce me as having been born and raised on Staten Island, NYC, and then living and working in Europe, particularly Scandinavia. Actually, I would argue that I grew up in a kind of “Europe” as an idea, whereas most of those who live in the entity marked Europe on the map, actually grew up primarily in a particular country, such as Italy, Poland, Norway, Belgium, Greece, The Netherlands, etc., and not in Europe as a whole. Next door to my Staten Island home, Mr. Roussiani had a huge Italian garden, including

grapes for wine that he fermented in great wooden barrels buried in the earth, and an olive tree, and he taught me the rudiments of gardening. To the other side, my best friend Johnny had an Italian mother, Anne, and a Polish father, Ignatius (Iggy), who introduced me to mushroom gathering in the local woods. In Boy Scout Troop Two, many of the leaders, such as troop master Haggdorn, were of Scandinavian origin, and they taught me how to live in the forests and rivers of upstate New York where Scout camp *Aquehonga* was located. My father's best friend, Danny, was the son of Jewish refugees from Belgium, the Newbourgs, who had a large, lovely French garden, and they are the reason I have an orchard with apples and mulberries and make cider at our country home in Denmark (my wife is Danish-born and I am a naturalized Dane). The vegetables we ate in my home on Staten Island were produced by local Greek truck farmers and the resultant taste for things Greek is among the reasons our family has a home in Ermoupolis, Syros. *Aquehonga*, the Native American name for what became Staten Island, was of course originally colonized by the Dutch, who left a heritage of landscape names such Kill Van Kull, New Dorp and Todt Hill (where my parents and brother are buried). As a youth I thus experienced a kind of union of European culture and landscape that formed my place identity, and which explains why the landscapes of Europe, rather than that of any particular country, mean a great deal to me.

Staten Island, as the above suggests, had a large rural landscape that one normally would not identify with New York City, and its cultural landscape was worthy of conservation. This is why a case study from Staten Island played a key role in Ian McHarg's classic book, *Design with Nature*. Despite McHarg's book the landscape was largely raped by greedy politicians and developers subsequent to the building of the Verrazano Narrows Bridge to Brooklyn in 1964. As a result my father, who as a crusading journalist cared deeply about this landscape, felt he had to leave. The family home then moved to Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Here there is a system of direct township democracy that was effectively an inheritance of the Medieval substantive landscape polities of Europe. The townships, in my experience, did a much better job protecting their cultural and physical landscape than New York City did with respect to Staten Island. This background is the basis for my involvement in landscape studies and the development of my ideas and practice.

Q: What is European in European landscapes? The word Landscape in Europe has different backgrounds (region, management, painting, practices); do you see other, comparable concepts elsewhere?

A: Mexico was colonized by the Hapsburgs of Spain, and they introduced a system of quasi-independent

regional governance and management that was apparently patterned on the substantive landscape polities of Europe, especially greater Germany, but which also incorporated elements of the differing indigenous cultures of Mexico. Mexico thus has strong, differentiated regional cultures that are reflected in painting, but also in gastronomy, music, dress and folklore. Carl Sauer, the founder of American landscape geography, was aware of the similarity to European landscape polities, and this might help explain his lifelong devotion to the study of Mexico's regional landscapes. It is possible that this organizational form is also found in other South American countries, but I am not sure.

Q: Is there a European landscape (and: what is Europe. A geographical entity? An idea?)

A: As my discussion above suggests, Staten Island had a "European" landscape in idea, though not as a geographical entity. Contrariwise, many European countries can be said to have their origin as an idea as political entities, with a national landscape, in the Americas. Migrants from the many regions and countries making up modern Italy who had settled in South and North America (in places like Staten Island which was ca. 50% Italian in my youth) thus discovered their common heritage and identity in the "new" world, which led them to support and finance the work of people in the "old" world like Giuseppe Garibaldi who fought to unite Italy. Welsh national identity likewise has an important home in South America, and the IRA to this day gains vital support from Irish communities in the United States. Followers of Brexit might have noticed, by the way, that the issue of Irish unity has played a key role in Britain's internal and external negotiations.

Q: Do Scandinavian landscapes differ much from other European landscapes and in what way?

A: Scandinavia had a pan-Scandinavian movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century which, parallel to similar movements in Italy and Germany, sought, largely on the basis of language, to unite the nations speaking the different Scandinavian tongues – which to some degree are mutually intelligible with a little good will. The movement, that was led in part by the Danish plant geographer Joachim Frederik Schouw and which leaned toward a regional federation rather than a unified nation state, failed. It did leave a trace, however, in the present-day Nordic Council, a joint Scandinavian governmental body, under which I have worked, that also includes Finno-Ugric speaking Finland, a former colony of Sweden, that has a large Swedish speaking minority. On this basis, it could be said that Scandinavian landscapes are like European landscapes in-so-far as, while they differ greatly internally in physical terms, they are united through historical and cultural ties. Pan-

Scandinavianism failed largely because it lost ground to “national romantic” nationalist movements within Scandinavia, which tended to see links between the differing physical landscapes of the Scandinavian nations and the supposed national character of their people, often preferring sublime wild nature to the cultural landscape. The influential Norwegian/German/Danish geologist, natural philosopher, author and nationalist, Henrik Steffens, promoted this notion of landscape, for example, as part of an intellectual and artistic circle that included the painter Casper David Friedrich. Norwegian national romantic poetry, painting and song thus tended to emphasize the nation’s mountainous interior, even though it was the *northern seaway*, that tied Norway together economically, politically and culturally, and which for centuries had linked Norway to Denmark in a united kingdom ruled from Denmark. Denmark has no mountains but, like Norway, it has a strong archipelagic character that has fostered sea travel.

In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century nationalist promoters of “scientific” racial theories took national romanticism a step further in seeking to define Scandinavia in terms of links between the physical geography of the Scandinavian peninsula and a supposed Nordic race, in which case the mountainous character of much of the peninsula played an important role. In this way the physical landscape had key importance similar to that of the blood and soil nationalism of the Nazis, which also looked to the North for the source of its supposed racial identity. This blood and soil nationalism thus ideologically created a divisive perception of the European landscape held by a powerful populist movement which sought to unite Europe politically by military means, and racially through the suppression of those who were not perceived to belong to the European landscape. The defeat of the Axis powers greatly weakened this conception of landscape and race, though it would seem to be on the rise again today.

Q: What has been the role of the *European Landscape Convention (ELC)*? Did it bring more unity in the use of the concept of landscape in Europe? Furthermore: do you see a continuing role for the *European Landscape Convention*?

A: The *ELC* importantly has contributed to bringing unity in the use of the landscape concept in Europe because of its emphasis upon the importance of human perception, and thereby culture – as opposed to nature – in the definition and understanding of landscape. As noted in the forgoing, it is culture and history that unite the landscapes of Europe, not landscape as defined physically by nature. The *ELC* is also important because it defines landscape in areal terms. This is congruent with the historical areal meaning of landscape in Continental Europe, rather than the modern English understanding of

landscape as spatial scenery, in which the *land in landscape* ceases to mean land as a country or place (e.g. Friesland), and redefines land as earth or soil. I have therefor actively worked both with the *Council of Europe* to promote the *ELC* and, especially with the relevant Swedish authorities, to have the *ELC* ratified in Sweden. The *ELC* is, however, somewhat toothless because it relies more on good will than law. If it is to have a continuing effect I think it needs to give more emphasis to the often overseen role of customary law in protecting the practices that shape the cultural landscapes of particularly marginal agricultural areas, which are also of great recreational importance. It should be required reading for proponents of the *ELC* to read Lord Eversley (1910). *Commons, Forests and Footpaths: The Story of the Battle during the last Forty-five Years for Public Rights over the Commons, Forests and Footpaths of England and Wales*, just to see what a legal approach to the landscape rights of the people can accomplish. A significant threat to these marginal landscapes today, I believe, is the rewilding movement, which has its roots in notions of landscape dating back to the national romantics, natural philosophy and what followed.

Q: Is landscape basically a rural concept? Are cities (or highly urbanised areas) part of landscape or destroying the landscape?

A: Urban areas were historically integral to landscape polities. They had the areal character of the historical landscapes and the New England townships I have discussed above. The same is true for the ancient Greek “chora” that I have discussed in my most recent book *The Meanings of Landscape: Essays on Place, Space, Nature and Justice* (2019), which is partially concerned with urban landscape. The enclosure of land as private property, for both agricultural and industrial purposes, is perhaps the main structural reason for the separation of urban populations from the rural. Today, it is often the urban population that supports rewilding and the preservation of sublime landscapes that are empty of people, because they have lost contact with the rural world. In places like the Faeroe Islands, on the other hand, where much rural land is still kept in common, many urbanites continue to be in active contact with rural life and in my experience there seems to be little interest in wilderness, even though, to the outsider, the Faeroes might seem to be quintessentially wild.

Q: What are you presently working on?

A: My most recent book is essentially a compilation and reworking of articles, published in disparate places, that focused on the relationship between landscape, place and space in order to make these texts accessible to a wider readership. I would like to follow this up with another compilation that might

be called *The Meanings of Landscape Part Two: Essays on Nature, Environment and Justice*, that will explore in greater depth the conflicting ideas of nature behind, on the one hand, the conservation of cultural landscapes and, on the other, wilderness preservation and rewilding. More immediately, I am working together with Kent Mathewson on putting together a special issue on the work of the late David Lowenthal for the journal, *Landscape Research*, and another special issue, together with Maggie Row, on "Landscape, Justice and the Quality of Life," also for *Landscape Research*. Finally, I have a long-term project to write a book called *The Earth is Not a Globe!* about the many problems that have arisen over the centuries because the landscape has been perceived and shaped in terms of Euclidean geometry.

Q: What is your opinion on the new journal we are starting? Do you have any advice?

A: I think it is a really good idea to found a journal that will focus on the issues you have raised in your above interview. I have one piece of advice, which you might think about in revising your introductory editorial. This is to distinguish between, on the one hand,

the notion of landscape that drove the landscape art of the lowlands, which was concerned to portray landscapes as existent places (however idealized) that have been shaped substantively through indigenous custom, and, on the other hand, the Italian paintings of scenery, inspired by Biblical stories and classical mythology. It is true that the genre called landscape originated especially in the low countries, but I think that it is important that it was the Italian focus on central point perspective to create scenes, in which spatial aesthetics played a key role, that actually was the most influential in generating the English idea of landscape as scenic space, as argued by Denis Cosgrove. These Italian Renaissance scenic representations were concerned with universal laws, as expressed through spatial geometries, in a Roman legal tradition concerned with property and territoriality. I have written, if you are interested, about this difference, that makes a difference, in more detail in *Landscape, Nature and the Body Politic* (2002).

Thank you for this interview.

You are welcome.

## Endnotes

1. Olwig, K.R. (1984). *Nature's ideological landscape*. Allen & Unwin, London (The London Research Series in Geography 5).
2. Cosgrove, D.E. (1984). *Social formation and symbolic landscape*. London: Croom Helm (reprint Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 1998).
3. Olwig, K.R. (1996). 'Recovering the Substantive Nature of Landscape'. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 86, pp. 630-653.
4. Olwig, K.R. (2002). *Landscape nature and the body politic. From Britain's Renaissance to America's New World*. University of Wisconsin Press, Madison.
5. Olwig, K. & D. Mitchell (eds.) (2009). *Justice, Power and the Political Landscape*. Routledge, Abingdon. See also: Jones, M. & K.R. Olwig (2008). *Nordic landscapes; region and belonging on the northern edge of Europe*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis / London; .
6. Olwig (2019). *The meanings of landscape. Essays on place, space, environment and justice*. Routledge, London/New York.