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Popular Culture as Folk Culture

In the late eighteenth, throughout the nineteenth, and into the early part of the twentieth century, different groups of intellectuals, working under the different banners of nationalism, Romanticism, folklore, and finally, folk song, “invented” the first concept of popular culture. In fact, these debates eventually produced two definitions of popular culture. The first was popular culture as a quasi-mythical rural “folk culture,” and the other – and it was very much the “other” – was popular culture as the degraded “mass culture” of the new urban-industrial working class.¹

The culture of the “common people” has always been an object of concern for men and women with social and political power. However, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as “traditional” popular culture, and the “traditional” cultural relations between dominant and subordinate classes, began to collapse under the sweeping impact of industrialization, urbanization, and the emergence of an urban-industrial working class, many European and American intellectuals started to take a special interest in the culture of the “folk” (Burke 1996). Middle-class men and women began to demand stories and songs from the people from whom they had previously demanded only labor and respect. In this way, then, folk culture was very much a category of the learned, constructed by

intellectuals, especially collectors, editors, and publishers, and not a concept generated by the people defined as the folk.

The collecting of, and the theorizing about, the culture of the folk occurs in two historical periods. The first period (when the objects of collection and study were “ballad” and “folk tales”) began with the publication of Thomas Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* in 1765 and ended with Francis James Child’s *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (the first volume of the first edition was published in 1857, the third edition in 1898). The second period (when the object of collection and study was the “folk song”) began with the publication of Carl Engel’s *An Introduction to the Study of National Music* (1866) and ended with the publication in 1907 of Cecil James Sharp’s *Folksong: Some Conclusions*.²

Nature and Nationalism

The “discovery” of folk culture was an integral part of emerging European nationalisms. The role of the actual folk – rural workers – was mainly symbolic. As we shall see, they were the mere carriers of something they did not really understand; the embodiment of a way of life that they themselves were increasingly powerless to sustain. From the very influential work of Johann Gottfried Herder in the 1770s to the last major contribution to the debate on folk song, that of Sharp in 1907, we find the same idea repeated over and over again: folk culture is the very embodiment of the nature and character of a nation. For this reason, if for no other, it should be collected and treasured.

In Herder’s work on folk culture the natural and the national blur. The value of *Volkslied* (folk or people’s song), in its spontaneity and simplicity, is that it is almost an outgrowth of nature: it is the nature in which the culture of the nation can be grown. Herder argued that folk song still possessed what all poetry had once possessed – a moral or civilizing function. Folk song thus represented a fundamental challenge to artificial and inauthentic modes of

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living. As such it suggested the possibility of a return to a more “grounded” or “rooted” culture; a return to culture before the Fall into the corrupting conditions of industrialization and urbanization, which for Herder was producing artificiality at the “top” and degradation at the “bottom” of society. But because the music of the folk belonged to a time before the Fall, it carried within it the possibility of purification; the soul of the nation could be made to rise above the contamination and corruption of a mechanical and material civilization. He therefore urged intellectuals to follow his example (of 1774 and 1778) and make collections of the poetry of the folk.

Like Herder, the folk-tale collectors Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm believed that folk culture provided access to the origins of, and the possibility of a return to, an authentic German cultural identity. Although industrialization and urbanization threatened to sweep away what little remained of folk culture, there was still time to collect and preserve this vital and valuable heritage before it disappeared forever. In the preface to the first edition of *Household and Children's Tales* (1812), the Grimms presented their collection in the language of a romantic allegory:

when the heavens have unleashed a storm, or when some other natural disaster has battered down a whole harvest, we may well find that in some sheltered corner by the roadside, under hedges and shrubs, a few ears of corn have survived. When the sun begins to shine again, they will grow, hidden and unnoticed. No early scythe will cut them for the cornhouses. Only late in summer when the ears are ripe and heavy with grain, some poor humble hand will glean them, and bind them carefully, one by one. The little bundles will be carried home, more cherished than big sheaves, and will provide food for the winter, and perhaps the only seed for the future. (quoted in Michaelis-Jena 1970: 52–3)

The harvest that had been battered down by urbanization and industrialization had left behind the remains of a simpler time of

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“kings, princes, faithful servants and honest craftsmen” (53). With these remains it may be possible to provide food for the winter and seed for a better future. They were not alone in this hope. As one Finnish intellectual proclaimed in 1809, “No fatherland can exist without folk poetry. [It] . . . is nothing more than the crystal in which a nationality can mirror itself; it is the spring which brings to the surface the truly original in the folk soul” (quoted in Burke 1996: 12).

Peter Burke (1996) argues that between 1500 and 1800 there occurred a remarkable change in the attitude of members of the dominant class toward the culture of subordinate classes. As he explains,

In 1500, they despised the common people, but shared their culture. By 1800 their descendants had ceased to participate spontaneously in popular culture, but they were in the process of rediscovering it as something exotic and therefore interesting. They were even beginning to admire “the people”, from whom this alien culture had sprung. (286)

Although in general terms this is undoubtedly true, we need to remember that “the people” they admired were a people safely in the past; “the people” of the urban present were still despised.³ Therefore, although Herder and the other collectors appear to argue against the more traditional view of “lower-class” culture as little more than the fallen sweepings of what had once belonged to the dominant classes, this did not mean that they saw all “ordinary people” – those who still sang the songs and told the tales – as the very embodiment of both the nature and the character of the nation. In his collection *Folk Songs* (1778), Herder was at pains to make a clear distinction, one which became the model for all future collections and comments on collections, between the urban “rabble” and the rural “people.” As he explained, “‘People’ does not mean the rabble in the streets, which never sings or creates but rather screams and mutilates true folk songs” (quoted in Clark 1969:

259). A similar point is made by William Motherwell (*Minstrelsy: Ancient and Modern*, 1827). He claims that traditional songs (what others – mostly later – would call folk songs) were the progeny of “the patriotick children of an ancient and heroick race,” who should not be confused with the urban “rabble.” Motherwell, like the brothers Grimm, feared that “opportunities of recovering traditional song” were disappearing because of the way “changes . . . within this half century [have affected] the manners and habits of our peasantry and labouring classes, with whom this song has been cherished.” The problem was that working people had “departed from the stern simplicity of their fathers, and have learned with the paltry philosophers, political quacks, and illuminated dreamers on Economick and Moral science, to laugh at the prejudices, beliefs, and superstitions of elder times” (quoted in Harker 1985: 56). Pushing this argument a little further, Francis James Child (1857) denies the folk any role in the production of folk songs (which he calls “popular ballads”): “the popular ballad is not originally the product or the property of the lower orders of the people” (quoted in Hart 1906: 757). Such a fact is “obvious”; the ballad has its origins with the “class whose acts and fortunes they depict – the upper class – though the growth of civilisation has driven them from the memory of the highly polished and instructed, and has left them as an exclusive possession to the uneducated.”

Whether or not folk culture had been produced by the peasantry, it was an inheritance which they had already begun to neglect. Increasingly, the peasantry, like the urban rabble, could not be trusted with the nation’s folk heritage. Fortunately, the middle-class collector was at hand. It was imperative that middle-class intellectuals assumed control of folk culture on behalf of the nation. This was joyously welcomed by the honest and deferential peasant of the middle-class imaginary. Sharp (1907) invites us to

Imagine, then, the joy when the collector calls upon them [the honest and deferential peasants] and tells them of his love of the old ditties. He has only to convince them of his sincerity

to have them at his mercy. They will sing to him in their old quavering voices until they can sing no more; and, when he is gone, they will ransack their memories that they may give him of their best, should, perchance, he call again, as he promised. (106; my italics)

Pastoral Life as Primitive Culture

Whether or not folk culture was understood as a product of the folk or merely something they had preserved, unaware of its true value, one thing that all the intellectuals involved agreed on, collectors and those who commented on the collections, was that production or preservation had only been possible because the folk had survived in primitive rural isolation. This fact alone made the rapid spread of industrialization and urbanization such a worrying development.

In *Primitive Culture* (1871), Sir Edward Burnet Tylor argued that folklore was a “survival” of an earlier savage culture shared by all social classes. Although European societies, according to Tylor, are now marked by a division between “the irrational beliefs and practices of the . . . peasantry” and “the enlightened views of the educated classes,” folklore “preserved the fragments of an ancient, lower culture, the culture of primitive man” (quoted in Dorson 1968: 193). Although most of humankind was everywhere destined to travel from savagery through barbarism to civilization, there would always be those groups for whom the journey appears to stop at a particular stage. As a result, “we may draw a picture where there shall be scarce a hand’s breadth of difference between an English ploughman and a negro of Central Africa” (194). In other words, civilization had marched on, leaving behind, in the beliefs and practices of “peasants” and “savages,” the fragmented remains of a once shared antiquity – a reminder to the “educated” (i.e. the dominant classes) of what they had once been and what still remained in both the colonies and the threatening darkness of the new industrial towns and cities of Europe and the USA.

The influence of Tylor's idea of cultural survivals on the development of the study of folklore was profound. He was a founding member of the Folk-Lore Society, serving on its council and as Vice-President. As Richard Dorson (1968: 196) observes, in the early work of the members of the Folk-Lore Society "the name of Tylor echoes like that of a household god." Under Tylor's influence, the Folk-Lore Society aimed "to establish a science devoted to reconstructing the world view of pre-historic savages from the contemporary lore of peasants" (202). As another leading member of the society, Andrew Lang, explained, "the method of folklore is . . . to compare" practices and beliefs found in "civilized" countries with those found in "uncivilized countries." Furthermore, "when an apparently irrational and anomalous custom is found in any country, to look for a country where . . . the practice is . . . in harmony with the manners and ideas of the people among whom it prevails" (quoted in Dorson 1968: 206).

The "savage" provided the means to understand the "peasant." As Dorson (1968: 212) observes: "In late Victorian England, a perfect situation existed within the framework of Empire to pursue this end." In the first annual report of the Folk-Lore Society (1879), George Laurence Gomme declared:

The Folk-Lore survivals of civilisation and the Folk-Status of savage tribes both, therefore, belong to the primitive history of mankind; and in collecting and printing these relics of one epoch, from two widely different sources, the Folk-Lore Society will produce that necessary comparison and illustration which is of so much service to the anthropologist. (quoted in Dorson 1968: 223)

Little wonder, then, that when Edward Clodd was elected President of the Folk-Lore Society in 1895, he was able to observe with confidence, "we have but to scratch the rustic to find the barbarian underneath" (250). The widespread dispersion of such a discourse allowed Ralph Vaughan Williams to claim in 1912, without any

hint of irony, “I am a psychical researcher who has actually seen a ghost, for I have been among the more primitive people of England and have noted down their songs” (quoted in Gammon 1980: 83). Similarly, when Samuel Johnson and James Boswell toured the Western Islands of Scotland in 1773, in search of what remained of “pastoral life” and “primitive customs,” they concluded that the people they had encountered “were as black and wild in their appearance as any American savages” (quoted in Burke 1996: 8). However, when they visited the Hebrides, their host in one village where they stayed was bitterly offended by their expectation of primitivism: “his pride seemed to be much piqued that we were surprised at his having books” (quoted in Burke 1992: 303).

The later we look in the nineteenth century, the more difficult it becomes to sustain the idea of an isolated folk living in conditions of primitive pastoralism beyond the reach of the modern world. If we think of the enormous changes in transport, communication, and modes of popular entertainment which took place in the nineteenth century, not to mention the travelling performers who had made a living entertaining country people from at least the Middle Ages, it is especially difficult to take seriously the claims made by Sharp in 1907. According to him,

The expression “common people” is used . . . strictly in its scientific sense [*sic*], to connote those whose mental development has been due not to any formal system of training or education, but solely to environment, communal association, and direct contact with the ups and downs of life . . . [T]he “common people” are the unlettered, whose faculties have undergone no formal training whatsoever, and who have never been brought into close enough contact with educated persons to be influenced by them. (3–4)

It might be possible to sustain such an argument if the people he called the common people had always existed in isolated rural enclaves. However, this is not Sharp’s argument. Somewhat

unconvincingly he elaborates: "In bygone days, the 'common people' formed no inconsiderable part of the population, and were fairly evenly distributed between urban and country districts" (4). It is very difficult to maintain a position which insists that people living in urban districts "have undergone no formal training whatsoever, and . . . have never been brought into close enough contact with educated persons to be influenced by them." This is little short of willful fantasy.

Romanticism also dreamed of a return to the simple virtues of nature as a means to combat and overcome the artificiality and savagery of urban and industrial life. This is very clear in one of the key documents of English Romanticism, William Wordsworth's *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* (1802). Wordsworth argues that poetry should be written in "the real language of men" as opposed to "the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers" (1973: 594, 595). He summarizes his position like this,

The principal object, then, which I proposed to myself in these poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life and to relate or describe them . . . in a selection of language really used by men . . . Low and rustic life was generally chosen, because in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity . . . because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived. (598)

Wordsworth's return to nature is in effect a call to embed culture back in the soil from which the concept had first developed. The call to return to nature was also a critique and rejection of urbanization and industrialization and the culture to which it had supposedly given birth. As he explains, in a passage which echoes through the

later work of many of the critics of so-called “mass culture” (see chapter 2),

a multitude of causes, unknown to former times, are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and unfitting it for all voluntary exertion to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor. The most effective of these causes . . . [is] the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence [popular newspapers] hourly gratifies. To this tendency of life and manners the literature [popular fiction] and theatrical exhibitions [stage melodrama and circus] of the country have conformed themselves . . . When I think upon this degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation, I am almost ashamed to have spoken of the feeble effort with which I have endeavoured to counteract it.

Although he worried that poetry might not be enough, he was convinced that a culture reconnected to its origins in nature could work to refresh and renew “the discriminating powers of the mind,” which in turn might prove a force to challenge urban and industrial culture and those for whom urban and industrial culture was culture.

Music Hall and the Masses

The collectors of folk culture idealized the past in order to condemn the present. The rural worker – the peasant – was mythologized as a figure of nature, a “noble savage” walking the country lanes and working without complaint the fields of his or her betters – the living evidence of, and a link to, a purer and more stable past. The urban-industrial worker, however, was fixed firmly in the present, completely detached from any salvation the past may have been able

to offer. Proof of a fall from grace was there for all to see in the urban-industrial worker's unquenchable taste for the corrupt and corrupting songs of the music hall.

Whereas the middle class could be encouraged to connect to a more organic past by embracing folk songs, the working class would have to be forcefully schooled in folk song in the hope of softening their urban and industrial barbarism, especially as it was made manifest in their enjoyment of the songs of music hall.⁴ In his "Inaugural Address to the Folk Song Society" in 1899, Sir Hubert Parry warned his audience that "there is an enemy at the door of folk music which is driving it out, namely, the common popular [music hall] songs of the day; and this enemy is one of the most repulsive and most insidious" (1899: 1). Music hall is presented as symptomatic of the supposedly degraded culture of the urban working class. As he explains,

If one thinks of the . . . terribly overgrown towns . . . where one sees all around the tawdriness of sham jewellery and shoddy clothes . . . [and] people who, for the most part, have the most false ideals, or none at all . . . who think that the commonest rowdyism is the highest expression of human emotion; it is for them that the modern popular music is made, and it is made with commercial intention out of snippets of musical slang. (1-2)

The problem, however, was not just that music hall was so bad but that it

will drive out folk-music if we do not save it. For even in country districts where folk-songs linger, the people think themselves behindhand if they do not know the songs of the seething towns; and as soon as the little urchins of distant villages catch the sound of a music hall tune, away goes the hope of their troubling their heads with the old fashioned folk-songs. (2)

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Unlike the music hall produced by “town civilisation,” English folk music is “among the purest products of the human mind.” The founding of the Folk Song Society, therefore, “is a hopeful sign”: it will

put on record what loveable qualities there are in unsophisticated humanity; and to comfort ourselves by the hope that at bottom, our puzzling friend, Democracy, has permanent qualities hidden away somewhere, which may yet bring it out of the slough which the scramble after false ideals, the strife between the heads that organise and the workmen who execute, and the sordid vulgarity of our great city-population, seem in our pessimistic moments to indicate as its inevitable destiny.

Cecil Sharp (1907: 137) makes a similar argument:

Flood the streets . . . with folk-tunes, and those, who now vulgarise themselves and others by singing coarse music-hall songs, will soon drop them in favour of the equally attractive but far better tunes of the folk. This will make the streets a pleasanter place for those who have sensitive ears, and will do incalculable good in civilising the masses.

In particular, Sharp advocated the introduction of folk songs into elementary schools as a means to civilize the masses. He was in no doubt of their “value as an educational force” (134):

For, good music purifies, just as bad music vulgarises; indeed, the effect of music upon the minds of children is so subtle and so far-reaching that it is impossible to exaggerate the harmful influence upon character which the singing of coarse and vulgar tunes may have. Up till now, the street song has had an open field; the music taught in the schools has been hopelessly beaten in the fight for supremacy. But the mind that has fed upon the pure melody of the folk will instinctively detect the

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poverty-stricken tunes of the music-hall, and refuse to be captivated and deluded by their superficial attractiveness. (135)

He also believed, bringing us back to questions of nationalism, that the “study of folk-song will . . . stimulate the growth of the feeling of patriotism” (135). Not only are folk songs an educational force, their presence in the education system would change the practice of education for the better. As he explains, in an argument that would have such terrible consequences in Germany in the 1930s,

Our system of education is, at present, too cosmopolitan; it is calculated to produce citizens of the world rather than Englishmen. And it is Englishmen, English citizens, that we want. How can it be remedied? By taking care, I would suggest, that every child born of English parents is, in its earliest years, placed in possession of all those things which are the distinctive products of its race . . . the folk-songs, those simple ditties which have sprung like wild flowers from the very hearts of our countrymen . . . If every child is placed in possession of . . . these race-products, he will know and understand his country and his countrymen far better than he does at present; and knowing and understanding them he will love them the more, realise that he is united to them by the subtle bond of blood and of kinship, and become, in the highest sense of the word, a better citizen, and a truer patriot. (135–6)

Imagining the Past to Make the Present

In many ways the idea of folk culture was a romantic fantasy, constructed through denial and distortion. It was a fantasy intended to heal the wounds of the present and safeguard the future by promoting a memory of a past which had little existence outside the intellectual debates of the late eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries. Here was a lost world of the authentic, a

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culture before the fall into industrialization, urbanization, and the unavoidable visibility of class relations. Although folk culture survived in the oral traditions of the folk, they did not really understand the treasure they held, and furthermore, they were disappearing as a group; therefore, it was the task of intellectuals – the true inheritors of folk culture – to secure its continuation, with a view to using it to solve the social and cultural problems produced by industrial capitalism.

The songs of the folk allowed middle-class intellectuals to imagine a lost national and natural identity and to dream of the possibility of a new “authentic” national unity of a people bound together once again by the organic “ties of land and language” (Martin-Barbero 1993: 12). At the center of this fantasy stood an image of “the people” that resembled neither rural folk nor urban masses. What resulted, as this empty, impossible category was valorized, was an active denial of the actual lived cultures of working people, both rural and urban – what the Colombian theorist Jesus Martin-Barbero has described as “abstract inclusion and concrete exclusion” (7).

The concept of popular culture as folk culture was an invention made from ways of seeing the culture of the men and women (and their families) who worked the land as agricultural laborers. It was their stories the collectors called “folk-tales,” their dances they called “folk-dances,” their songs they called “folk-songs,” their traditions they called “folk-lore,” a version of their culture they called “folk-culture.” These were not terms the rural people used themselves, certainly not before they were told that these were the terms to be used.⁵ The pastoral fantasy of the folk offered an alternative to the rather troublesome specter of the urban-industrial working class. In this sense, then, the intellectual cult of the rural folk was a nostalgic fantasy of a time when working people recognized their inferiority and acknowledged due deference to their social superiors. As John Carey (1992: 105) observes of intellectuals of the late nineteenth century, they “preferred peasants to almost any other variety of human being, since they were ecologically sound, and their traditional qualities of dour endurance, respect for their betters and

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illiteracy meant that the intellectual's superiority was in little danger from them.”

The first concept of popular culture was invented with the “discovery” of the folk in the late eighteenth century and in the folklore and folk-song movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Over a period of about 140 years the idea of popular culture as folk culture was developed by intellectuals across Europe and the USA. They had not set out to produce a way of thinking about popular culture, but in doing what they did – whether this was seeking to promote national cultures or to develop a science of “primitive man” – the first concept of popular culture was invented. But the study of folklore produced not only a concept of popular culture as folk culture, it also helped to establish the tradition of seeing ordinary people as masses, consuming mass culture. This is the concern of the next chapter.