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## **A Requiem for Folklore?: Myth, Truth, and Folklorism**

### **1. Understanding Folklore**

Few terms seem to cause more misunderstanding than the word “folklore”. This is why every discussion of folklore should precisely define what it refers to. Both names – folklore and folklorism – tend to be overused. If in conversation one person declares a passion for folklore (whatever it means), and an interlocutor expresses an opposite opinion, we should decide if the object of admiration is identical with the object of dislike, not to splice together two completely different things. Similar observations can apply to all concepts generally associated with folklore.

It should be also noted in the opening of this article that debates we have about folklore are conducted in the language of a society that lives away from the influence of folklore as such. For contemporary global civilisation, folklore, with its local character, seems only a relic, a “reminiscence from the past”, an exhibit, an exotic archaism, a word, a museum of a kind. For academics, in turn, it works as a concept that has lost its primitive, local, material and interpersonal nature and has become just a subject of intellectual discursive practice. It perhaps retains a genuine importance for politicians and ideologists – years of history prove clearly that politics has always referred to symbols and concepts derived from folklore (to achieve aims that, incidentally, were hardly ever related to it).

For a number of reasons, a degree of awareness is needed of how distant we are now from the model reality of folklore (we inevitably have to refer to a model image of folklore, not to lose our way among even the most interesting of its specificities). The awareness is required, above all, for the perception of the problem – it shows a difference between us and them. Folklore in its primitive shape means a uniform, holistic, consistent, but internally varied way of functioning for a local community. It is based on a specific kind of an archaic society and interpersonal relations, which are no longer available these days – unless in a gesture of regression, which we would have to succumb to in some inexplicable, surprising circumstances.

Folklore requires, then, a kind of social organization, and hence – also a kind of mutual relationship of the members of this organization. This communal character may be understood in broad terms as the existence of a group of people in a particular place at a particular time; and also as group productive activity, and as interpersonal and group communication. The character of such a community depends on external circumstances (natural environment), and especially on the way the community obtains and recreates the means necessary for its own existence. Communal relations are different in, for instance, migrating hunter-gathering groups and in groups that have been settled in a particular place for a longer time (e.g. urban and rural communities).

Consequently, if folklore is local and communal by nature, the lack of these qualities means an important change. Can we still talk about folklore in such a context? Basic social phenomena such as the division of work into professions, the diversification of activity, position and function, concentration on one type of activity (e.g. on artistic production), specificity, extensive exchange of goods, the development of artistic talents and individuality – these cannot possibly be associated with primitive, archaic folklore. Similarly, the same applies to commercial marketing of “folk culture” products. All the above phenomena belong to a different civilisation from the model folklore civilisation as such. This other civilisation is essentially based on its potential for universal and global influence. It could be called a modern recycling civilization responsible for simulacra, which enter a completely different social circulation from the circulation of the model folklore. This simulacrum civilisation is essentially mediated; thus, all phenomena labelled as “folklore” receive different meanings, evoke a very different kind of reception, and have different uses from those in the model civilisation.

Primitive, communal folklore belongs, then, to a specific, unique kind of local culture, closely related to particular forms of social existence and to spatial-environmental circumstances. These relations seem constitutive of and essential for this kind of folklore, which otherwise, deprived of them, loses its existential, cultural, and historical identity and authenticity. It becomes an ersatz of forms and uses of the original, primitive circulation. It turns into a quote, a stylistic game, an allusion, or even perhaps a commercial fake.

In the contemporary universal meaning of the term, local folklore does not have the status of culture, does not realise itself it is “culture”, “production”, “ritual”, or “custom”. Still, however, it merges with local forms of social life and loses its distinct character. Concepts such as “folklore”, “culture”, “ritual”, or “traditionalism” are created and then function outside folklore itself. They are in origin connected with a different, external, scholarly point of view.

Thus we tend to describe and interpret folklore through concepts not applicable to it. Universal culture (culture for everyone), as distant as it is from folklore, appropriates and reworks folklore materials for its own purposes (such as entertainment). It deprives folklore of its symbolic meaning and practical function. To a degree it changes creators, carriers, and users of folklore into clowns similar to the Indian chief from Sienkiewicz's *Sachem*. A folklore ritual of a local community is therefore something totally different from a performance for an audience. The role and functions of these two are strikingly different.

This difference itself leads to an embarrassing hermeneutic dilemma. Discussing folklore in a contemporary academic journal seems inappropriate. It introduces a specific intellectuality of thought into the presentation of something that is normally understood as preceding civilization, literature, and historiography. This institutional, academic model of discussion does not reflect the character of folklore. Still, discourse and intellectuality remain somehow outside folklore – analyses involve some discursive means that are hardly ever tangent with the subject of their study; they are discussions about the Other and lead to far-fetched conclusions.

This proves that the current popularity of discussions about folklore does not result from a need of folklore to develop. "Development" as such is a concept quite unrelated to folklore itself. The problem is not only based on a need for a comparison between contemporary and archaic cultures, but in a large degree reflects an internal dilemma of postmodern culture, which remains unable to encompass and interpret the whole of civilisation. As a result, that postmodern culture is unable to deal with itself – a regressive turn towards folklore points to the exhaustion of contemporary culture.

In this context folklore and folklorism seem problems of secondary and rather substitutive character. The emptiness of folklore is evident in the face of the fact that regional and rural folklore now offers little – if anything at all apart from some advertising for the regional tourism and business – to culture in general. This is so because they represent forms that have already been penetrated by the "official", dominant culture – by media, state funding, church influences, academic study, as well as by artistic and business activities of different sorts. What this kind of folklore produces is, at its best, just some bogus creations whose only psychosocial effect is tantamount to therapeutic cultural regression.

On these historical and cognitive levels the dilemma seems profound. To what degree can we understand people and communities that have never been acquainted with such concepts as "understanding the other" and "communication"? Can we, to use a crude example, understand ("taste") a cannibal if we fail to salt and spice

him properly? Why should we talk about folklore when we mean communal behaviours of a group that has never considered these behaviours to be “folkloristic”? When dealing with folklore one deals with civilizational and cultural difference, strikingly different from the one that is discussed and defined. One deals, in this way, with a folklore myth created and taken care of by postmodern culture. The myth produces as much satisfaction as frustration. In this context dealing with folklore is a sort of alibi. Fascination with folklore becomes intellectual masochism – it provides us with a pleasant illusion of “another place”, without actually changing anything.

To put it differently, in modern and postmodern culture folklore plays the role of exoticism, fashion, object of consumption, ideology, a tool of manipulation, a subject of scholarly deliberations. In the capitalist world, it inevitably also becomes goods. In this way it is alienated and transformed. The process has one on since Romanticism. Stanisław Wyspiański noticed the changes, and used them as the subject of his *The Wedding*, in which he presented a piercing and insightful image of the reiterative, artificial, and mediated character of folklore. He very clearly pointed to the faked authenticity of folklore by referring to stratified nineteenth-century Polish society. He depicted the historical process of ideological appropriation of folklore by the peasantry, which in the nineteenth century entered the historical scene, aspiring to take over the leadership of the nation from the aristocracy and nobility. “The peasant is power” was their motto. This appropriation led to massive, but failed, folkloristic experimentation in the twentieth century. I discuss this issue in detail below.

## **2. Centre and Periphery: The Dismantling of Local Cultures**

What is, then, the essence of the problem? Local folklore – and folkloristic archaism – are at risk because of growing pressure (competition) from the unifying forms of universal culture. Another danger comes from the productive, para-folkloristic forms of contemporary culture, e.g. teenage folklore. This pressure of “new folklore” results in numerous divisions and in the hybridity of folklore. The aspect is revealed even in the homonymous character of the term “folklore” as such, which is often understood as synonymous with ethnography and ethnology. In a broader sense folklore appears in numerous other forms, which only seem to have something in common. Let us then have a careful look at the issue.

a) As archaeological studies indicate, the primitive, model folklore, and also its later forms, defined the culture (the way of living) of prehistoric societies, which existed in relative isolation, made use of neither writing, nor institutions of a religious or state character. Local tradition was the primary element that bound a community. Primitive

societies, as some recent studies on Neolithic urban Çatalhöyük societies in Turkey prove, did not make any use of the division of labor. Local activities, cultural forms and values – that is, folklore itself – were born through a transmission of accepted patterns (such as spatial organisation, tool production, construction activities, burial customs, gathering food, etc.). In this way folklore regulated not only the creation and recreation of all means necessary for the communities' existence, but also all family relations and all basic relations of everyday life in the community; it guaranteed a stable existence of the community by maintaining its identity and uniformity.

With time, however, folklore evolved under the influence of changes within the community itself, often caused by contact with other communities. With the advent of the division of labor, social hierarchies, privileges and inequalities folklore underwent subsequent transformations. With the development of religious and state organs, it was inevitable for the communal culture to diversify and divide.

b) The beginnings of the division of labor, state institutions, and social hierarchies must have influenced primitive communal folklore. The oldest Sumerian cities (Eridu, Ur, Lagash, Umma, Uruk, Kish, Sippar) exemplify the transformations typical for the process, which categorized cultural forms and values into central ones (universally binding, protected by state institutions) and local/professional ones. Instead of focusing on community, these highlighted individuality and difference.

The former group – representative for political activity – became the domain of the privileged, who used their financial assets and power to organize state celebrations and control religious rituals. Patronage was offered to the forms of art which created what had some value for the general public and offered pleasure and entertainment. Folklore, in turn, belonged to local communities and to the inferior, dominated strata, normally obliged to focus exclusively on production and service for the privileged. The lives of these subjected communities also underwent constant changes, connected with the development of professions and dependent on local circumstances and traditions. Professional folklore is the result of this process – it is represented by the culture of sailors, farmers, shepherds, miners, masons, weavers, coopers, carpenters, shoemakers, blacksmiths, servants, and students.

Social barriers, however strong, did not isolate folklore from external influences. The shape and functions of folklore were constantly affected by the centralizing activity of religious and state institutions. These denied the autonomy of folklore and enfeebled its cultural pluralism, which could potentially lead to separatist actions and put the central power in danger. Christianization and Islamization are good cases in point – both, when dealing with paganism, devastated numerous forms of local folklore and replaced these with

their own cultural elements. Polish Romantic authors had a reason to lament the annihilation of idyllic, Slavic rural communities by a brutal, feudal, and centralizing Christianity. At that time folklore was losing its independence and was subjected to the state and the church.

c) Although, under the influence of twentieth-century folkmania, we typically associate folklore only with the countryside and villages – that is, also with agricultural production – urban folklore should also be mentioned as a truly interesting phenomenon that has been developing since Neolithic times. Its unique cultural role was discussed by Mikhail Bakhtin in his *Rabelais and Folk Culture of the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (1940/1961). This kind of folklore developed mainly in the city square, during public holidays, and at carnival time<sup>1</sup>.

It should be also noted that urban civilization is at least as archaic as the rural one. The view that rural civilisation precedes the urban one (and that folklore should be associated with the countryside) does not reflect the present state of research. The excavations from Çatalhöyük, Turkey present a Neolithic urban settlement from 7,400–7,300 BC, inhabited, at its best, by ten thousand people. These discoveries not only put in doubt the stereotypical view that settled rural communities preceded and allowed the development of urban communities, but also suggest a different image of folklore, especially that of archaic cultures, some of which have passed into regional folklore.

A key issue here is the difference between preindustrial and industrial urban settlements<sup>2</sup> – the rapid development of the latter in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has drawn our attention away from the existence and functions of the former. Preindustrial settlements were established in communities that based their existence on hand labor and animal labor and knew no production technology or trade exchange of any sophisticated sort. Gideon Sjoberg has pointed to the integrated character of such urban cultures, which relied much more on mutual help and services within family, clan, or religion relations. The anomie, anarchy, and chaos typical of modern urban structures did not appear in this context. Here urban life was dominated by public forums, street markets, temples, and religious ceremonies. Productivity was an issue of lesser importance. Because of this, urban communities could integrate and remain consistent – they were established on the basis of cult and cultural values<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> See: R.-E. Mohrmann. "Die Stadt als volkskundliches Forschungsfeld". *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 1990, B. 93: 129–149; and T. Hengartner, *Forschungsfeld Stadt. Zur Geschichte der volkskundlichen Erforschung städtischer Lebensformen*. Berlin: Reimer, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> These terms were coined by Gideon Sjoberg in his *The Preindustrial City: Past and Present*, London: Free Press, 1960.

<sup>3</sup> More on this issue can be found in the book edited by Chris Jenks. *Urban Culture: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*. Vol. 1–3. London: Routledge, 2004.

Structures of this kind played an important cultural role, extending outside the borders of the city. In *The Pivot of the Four Quarters* (1971) Paul Wheatley indicates that some ancient and medieval cities (Ur, Jerusalem, Babylon, Rome, Mecca, etc.) became important sites of religious cults, which controlled, united and centralized through religious practice the surrounding rural areas and their cultures. In this way elements of local folklore were absorbed by urban cultures, which adjusted them to their own frameworks.

It is difficult, then, to believe in the Romantic view of folklore as originating in rural and peasant communities, which possessed the only authentic values of the nation. The integrating function was typical especially for ritual cities, which in a particular area established their cultural, religious, and political structures. It was these structures, as in the case of ancient Jerusalem or papal Rome, that not only proposed, universalized and preserved the oldest, sometimes archaic ideas, symbols, patterns, and traditions, but also countered some decentralist and separatist tendencies advanced by schismatic movements.

Cities of this kind developed in a tense relationship to the local folklore. In their attempts to establish, codify and introduce a dominant tradition into the lives of local communities bound by language, religion, and ethnic character, they played an integrating, ortogenetic role. In other words, they controlled the local communities with an orthodox image. Jerusalem, Byzantium, and Rome constructed great ethnic and religious narrations binding for the whole community, regardless of local differences in identity. These holy cities were different than the cities of innovation like Marseilles, Paris, London, or New York. The latter provided impulses for the reassessment of tradition and for revolutionary political, social, and economic changes.

d) It was thanks to the influence of the nineteenth century that rural folklore gained popularity. The countryside became a folkloristic treasure, not only an alternative to polished cosmopolitan universal culture, but also a basis for a separate national culture. This promotion of rural folklore was the result of many factors. The most important of them were the decline of hierarchical society and the introduction of democratic social changes, which led to the beginnings of civil society. These changes gave not only political and social, but also cultural rights to the peasantry and the bourgeoisie. Rural folklore gained recognition as a symbol of an expanding peasant culture and of a national culture, or even a universal culture, of a sort. Such processes culminated at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. With time, however, rural folklore lost some of its distinct character. It had to stand against a workers' folklore, understood as a sub-culture of the urban working class.

e) Romanticism developed a multifaceted literary folklore, which included oral works (frequently reworked into written literary material) and numerous stylisations of folklore in the works of individual writers who had little to do with peasantry. The development of literary folklore clearly proved that local folklore had entered a national, universal sphere. This facilitated a general cultural recycling of folklore and made it possible to provide its elements with ideological meaning.

f) Symptomatically, the twentieth century blurred the boundaries between folklore (in its rural version) and multifarious subcultures – hippies, skins, skinheads, punks, rockers, Satanists, gays, as well as ethnic, political and religious minorities. Subcultures of this sort usually create their own individual and distinct behaviors and tendencies. They lose, however, two key elements of original, primitive folklore: locality and traditional character. They do retain other aspects: they preserve and demonstrate a sense of difference. Therefore it is an open question whether contemporary subcultures are getting closer and closer to folklore or the other way round – if extant folklore forms are inevitably going to mutate into subcultures, free of all burdens of tradition and local, insular character.

g) Yet another phenomenon worth mentioning is the universalization of folklore, especially the artistic one. In the global civilisation of the contemporary world, folklore, too, has to develop some global aspects. In the face of commercial systems, folkloristic production and activity lose their markers of traditionalism and locality. They are no longer ignorant, anonymous, amateur, and isolated from professional, innovative, and avant-garde artistic production. The international success of folk music bands is an obvious symptom of this process (and of the increasing hybridity of folklore forms, gradually losing their original bases), which means that what used to be folklore becomes an element of universal culture. Folklore, different as it is from original forms of cultural production, retains only some anecdotal, promotional, and commercial value.

It is difficult these days to distinguish clearly between primitivism and authenticity on the one hand, and folklorism on the other. How do we classify local artists such as Nikifor Krynicki? Does he go with one group or the other? Authenticity is, above all, anonymous, spontaneous, and collective, but these criteria tend to break down. At present any so-called folklore artist, if he/she offers quality work, immediately becomes a part of the mainstream network of professional art. We can then only talk of folklore origin (because of the art's geographical origin in a rural area) or of the folkloristic style of artistic output.

Any careful analysis of folklore forms and manifestations indicates that the traditional association of folklore with the village and with a particular ethnic region makes little



sense. It is difficult to notice any region in contemporary Europe without urban structures, and even more difficult to find cities free of the influences of modern civilization. A similar observation could apply to other continents. Contemporary cities are essentially centres of modernity, diversity, international communication, and universal culture. They neutralize archaic, exotic rural folklore, or subject it to the logic of modernity. It is still not clear whether they will develop a modern folklore of their own. Mass culture, subcultures, and alternative cultures all clearly struggle to establish themselves as folklore of this sort.

Native communities preserved their traditional culture mainly through isolation, demographic circumstances (low population density), insufficient means of communication and transport, and limited possibility of transfer for ideas, patterns and goods. Traditionalism became, then, an internal mechanism of culture. Consequently, with all its rejection of innovative practices, it also stimulated isolation. Separateness of this sort is impossible in the contemporary world. Local culture, when watching its own reflection in dozens of electronic media, watches itself in the mirror of other cultures, compares itself to them, and loses its specificity and identity. It is no longer as it used to be in isolated communities – no longer a necessity. It becomes a non-obligatory culture of choice.

### **III. The Ambiguity of Folklore: Folklore and Modernism**

Why did the subject of folklore gain so much importance at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? What historical powers brought it to light? What consequences did the debate have? It seems that the promotion of folklore was motivated by the social and cultural crisis of the time. Court culture and classicism had been extinguished by the end of the eighteenth century – totally unable to meet the demands of a new society, which faced the collapse of the feudal system, the awakening of lower social strata, the secularization of culture, the rapid development of education, democratic political changes, and the general progress of civilization. The pastoral poetry of the time sketched out a faked image of reality. Classical drama worked no better. Also the realistic eighteenth-century bourgeois novel did not follow the most recent changes, and failed to reflect the needs of a new world that was born after the French and American revolutions and the Napoleonic Wars. It presented just one point of view – that of the bourgeoisie preoccupied mainly with itself, ignorant about the reshaping reality of the period.

Two key issues drew the attention of culture and literature – the questions of nationality and the folk. Both problems were of major importance for the masses. As a result some questions about the origin of the nation, its rights and features seemed vital to the discussion. In the feudal system nationality was not a value of major importance, since what mattered was the power of the feudal lord over his subjects, regardless of their origin or faith.

The other issue – that of the role of the folk – was equally significant. In class society the role was minimal; the folk was synonymous with a dark, anonymous, formless mass, obliged to work, serve, and obey. In the eyes of an eighteenth-century rationalist, the customs of the folk were savage, almost barbarian. They did not represent values and thus deserved to be condemned and eradicated.

The modern breakthrough established a new importance for nationality and the folk, and led to the elevation and historical recognition of both. The folk and the nation received a historical ancestry and memory. They became open to future changes, to a new reality. What used to be peripheral, marginalized, and unnecessary, came into the focus of the public attention of the time. The nation and the folk – so much neglected in the feudal system – now aspired to be independent subjects in history.

By highlighting the importance of the question of nationality, Romantics explored its origins (Mickiewicz claimed that a national awareness was important even for Pericles and his contemporaries). They also noticed native, original, authentic aspects of the folk. Folklore and nationality were in this way seen as connected. The increasing status of the nation increased the status of the folk, and vice versa. This genetic and allegorical construct became the ideological foundations of modernism. More than that, it signalled the end of feudalism and the political and cultural birth of modernity.

This breakthrough resulted also in a major reassessment of values and in a reversal of hierarchies. When looking for the authentic and the original, Romantic authors bypassed the derivative, imitative culture of their time. They despised its “polished culture”, as Johann Gottfried Herder put it. They penetrated the past and discovered authenticity in ancient and medieval myths, tales, epics, songs, and legends. Still, however – they also discovered it in a synchrony, right on their doorstep, that is, in customs, products, and the oral tradition of the folk. These discoveries were vital for subsequent radical changes in perception and assessment of culture and its relationship with society.

In this way folklore gained complete cultural recognition. It became, as a part of folk culture, at least an equal partner to the elite culture of the high society. Thanks to its influences, the understanding of culture also changed substantially. Culture was no longer seen as composed exclusively of high art (painting, sculpture, ballet, theater) aimed at satisfying the needs of the affluent strata of society, but also as composed of products of the everyday lives of the people. Apart from the oral works (folk poetry) so much praised by the Romantics, other aspects of rural folklore made a name for themselves. Great importance was assigned to folk customs, material culture (tools, pottery, fabrics, buildings, etc.), decorative art, folk holidays and fairs, games, cuisine, healing methods, rituals, garments, music, dance, and numerous other cultural phenomena.

From the point of view of dominant high culture, folklore and folk culture, with what was seen as a constant replication of the same patterns, seemed archaic and excessively traditional. This feature started to constitute their definition. Soon, however, traditionalism turned out to be complex and provoked contradictory interpretations. Traditionalism reassured the Romantic concept of nationality, which Romantics perceived as primeval, ahistorical, unchangeable. This, in turn, added a mythical, sacral dimension to the folk and the nation, and supported the concept (mistaken as it was) of the unchangeable nation. Also, the same traditionalism motivated patriotic resistance against enemies who limited the nation's freedom.

In this sense folkloristic traditionalism justified a struggle against the colonization and assimilation carried out by European empires: England, Prussia, Napoleon's France, the Romanovs' Russia, or Austria of the House of Habsburgs. In the Poland of the partition period, patriots struggled against Russian and German anti-Polish tendencies. The same idea motivated Ukrainians to defend native Ukrainian folk elements against the influence of Polish economic and cultural domination in the region.

If, then, folkloristic traditionalism in many ways supported the idea of nationality, it also worked very much against modernism. Traditionalism collided with modernity's promotion of reform, social and political freedom, progress, education, science, industrialisation, democracy, secularism, artistic innovation and originality, as well as a general promotion of culture.

Rapid changes in civilisation also led to a homogeneity of values and a reduction of cultural differences, to social mobility (through the development of new means of transport and communication), and to an increasing standard of living. These processes were at odds with the orthodox ethos of rural existence, which promoted repetition, continuity, preservation of patriarchal relationships, and respect for cultural patterns and established models of communication. Afraid of rapid transformations (especially of secularization and anarchy), some Romantics saw folklore as a bastion of good customs and social, national, religious values: religion, piety, virtue. It seemed to them that it was regional, peasant folklore that could preserve a link with the past and defend tradition against the devastating influences of modernism. But proponents of change motivated their activity in a similar way – they believed folklore to be a brake on progress.

The ambiguity consisted in the fact that, on the one hand, folklore was a creation of modernism (which increased the status of folk), and on the other folklore seemed a traditionalist alternative to it. This ambivalence highlighted some ideological functions of folklore, which were made evident only in the twentieth century – in two major

ideological and cultural experiments. It is important to discuss them in detail, because both shed light on some hidden, but poisonous stings of folklore and folk culture.

#### **IV. The Heyday and Collapse of Folklore – from Romanticism to Totalitarianism**

One of the experiments alluded to above was connected with the 1917 revolution and the beginnings of the Soviet Union, after the fall of the Tsarist empire. The Soviet state's social and ideological superstructure, as is now commonly known, was founded on the concept of the government of the people, or, to be more particular, of the industrial proletariat allied with the peasantry, and exercising their power (the dictatorship of the proletariat) through the actions of the Soviet party. Although the state turned against the village, the peasantry, and the rural economy in its individual, patriarchal sense, the ideological programme of the system was deeply based on folk culture. Folklore played an important role for the state at that time. Communal traditions of folklore perfectly suited both the agricultural, social, and economic programmes of the party and its ritualistic celebrations. According to official doctrine, the primitive, original folkloristic community and communism itself were parts of one social reality.

A glorification of the folk (i.e. lower social strata preoccupied with material production), which began in the eighteenth century, came into its heyday in the Soviet state. Denigrated, belittled, banished from public life, folk culture, according to the revolutionary program of the new society, was to take the place of the high culture of the privileged classes. It was supposed to absorb the high culture in its best forms, and then accommodate it, rehash, adapt to new norms, and use it in the service of a working class that had previously been separated from cultural goods. In other words, the ultimate task for cultural policy was to change high culture into folk culture, and folk culture into a universal one.

The folklore that was representative of the people took a dominant position in general culture. Having abandoned its marginal status, folklore gained official character and became a tool of the Soviet state. All parameters of folklore, however, had to undergo a specific inversion. State institutions devastated authenticity, and mass propaganda deprived folklore of identity and difference. Folklore, which in Romanticism worked as "a great narration" of identity and emancipation as well as a symbol of authentic culture and its link to human life, mutated into something totally opposite. It no longer was a proof of culturally productive difference, but became a tool of political uniformity. In a totalizing social-political system, folk culture and folklore also manifested similarly "total" characteristics.

The other major folkloristic experiment of the twentieth century was the German Nationalist-Socialist state<sup>4</sup>, the doctrine of which was clearly based on premises developed much earlier: the nationalism and folklorism of Romantics, who traced the origins of Germanic identity in archaic, tribal, and racial folk communities. The concepts of folk (*Volk*) and nation (*Nation*) rose to great prominence in the 1933–1945 period; they received new ideological and propaganda functions. The same applied to the academic study of folklore (*Volkskunde*), which was turned into a Nazi-controlled political activity. Under the auspices of the NSDAP, and with all its funding, folklore studies became one of the leading academic disciplines. It prepared the scholarly foundations for racist and expansive Nazi policy.

Folklorists played an important role in the glorification of the Germanic element (also associated with Aryan or Nordic roots). When the Nazis came to power, scholars started to catalogue innumerable “dominant” German customs, activities and values manifested not only in Germany, but also in every other place where German influences could be detected, even in the most distant past – e.g. in all communities speaking German (*Sprachinsel*). This project was directly connected with the military expansion of 1938–1945.

The intensive study of folklore – including historical folklore – elevated some Nazi symbols, such as the swastika or the Germanic sun cross. Alfred Rosenberg, a leading figure behind Nazi ideology, author of *Der Mythos des Zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts: eine Wertung der seelischgeistigen Gestaltenkämpfe unserer Zeit* (1930), claimed that the basis for the study of German history was not only connected with race and the past, but also with folklore, because without referring to historical ethnic sources historians would be unable to recreate the image of the German spirit, which had undergone numerous falsifying processes through time.

The peasantry, with all its physical Nordic strength, was seen not only as the breadwinners of the German nation, but also as the bastion and embodiment of the German spirit. Peasants were not prone to external influences and preserved in their folklore all the cultural values that were essentially German and *völkisch* – typical for the pure German race. Hitler himself praised the peasant community as the solid basis of the nation. The healthy, sane, fortifying culture of the simple people (*des einfachen Volks*) was seen by the Nazi party as a striking opposite to the liberal and Soviet cultures created by dissolute artistic elites. It represented, to put it in contemporary terms, a culture of life negating the culture of death, developed by intellectuals hostile to the nation.

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<sup>4</sup> This issue is carefully discussed by Hermann Bausinger in his “Nazi Folk Ideology and Folk Research”. *The Nazification of an Academic Discipline: Folklore in the Third Reich*. Eds. J.R. Dow, H. Lixfield. Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1994, p. 11–33. See also Hauschild, Thomas. *Lebenslust und Fremdenfurcht. Ethnologie im Dritten Reich*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1995.

The support of the Nazi state clearly stimulated the study of German folklore. Results were numerous: new institutes, libraries, museums, archives, exhibitions, rituals, folk fairs, and celebrations. Folklore crossed regional barriers, spread into everyday life, and gained major importance for the whole country. Still, there was an unavoidable price: folklore had to be subjected to the political agenda of the party and to its racist propaganda and nationalist doctrine. Folklorists of the Third Reich more or less consciously added to the devastation of all non-Germanic cultures seen as inferior or valueless. They also allowed the party to exercise totalitarian control over Germans as well – they actively supported the annihilation of folklore by adapting it to the needs of political dictatorship. All in all, they strengthened nationalist unifying doctrine expressed in the Nazi slogan *Ein Volk – ein Reich – ein Führer*. Therefore, they acted against their own work by destroying cultural diversity.

These twentieth-century experiments with folklore were by no means exceptional. Folk culture and folklore were frequently the object of manipulation by church or state institutions, which in different situations very willingly brought the concept of the nation to light, and saw folklore as an embodiment of it. The motivation of colonial empires was similar – in the freedom of native folkloristic expression they saw an antidote for all pro-independence movements of the colonized locals. Manipulations of folklore, whatever opinion we may have about them, offered some benefits to folklorists and their discipline, since they stimulated general interest. It is disputable, however, whether these benefits justify the abovementioned management of folklore.

A separate detailed study should perhaps be devoted to folklore in capitalist and contemporary electronic civilisations. It is undoubtedly true that numerous urban and industrial forms of mass culture (often associated with technological development) have begun to compete with traditional, rural, communal folklore. The culture of motorcycle gangs is a good case in point. Another danger is created by the increasingly commercial activity of the media. The last straw that broke folklore's back was, however, to be found elsewhere: social and civilizational changes in the rural areas added to the same devastating effect. A rural idyll is easy to imagine in a world of simple hard work, but a bit more difficult in one dominated by tractors and harvesters. The dissolution of villages, the influence of machines and electronics on the life of the village are a harbinger of a special requiem for traditional folklore.

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