

TOWARDS A NEW DEFINITION OF FOLK

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Odi profanum vulgus.
 Horace.

It could be said that a discussion of the definition of folk is merely a quarreling about labels. However, I think the way that this concept is defined reveals a good part of the methodology used in approaching the subject. There are numerous definitions and descriptions of folk, but apparently none of them works as well as would be desired, since what we should understand by folk is still a problem in our day. This paper is an attempt to describe a workable definition of folk in psychological terms.

It is useful in the pursuit of the definition of the term folk, to look first at how folk is used in the daily language. In German, as well as in other languages, Volk has the meaning of populus as well as vulgus, in the sense of "the common people" (des gemeinen Volkes). In addition to this it can also mean, in an historical-political sense, an entire nation. Horace, with his odi profanum vulgus, was among the first to stress the vulgarity and the negative sides of the folk, such as their lack of education and individuality. Friedrich Schiller, a German poet, through his revolutionary Wallenstein--a drama concerned with the problem of progress and self-realization--speaks of the essence of folk as the "eternal past" (das ewig Gestrige). Here we find a hint of the relation of folk and tradition. Johann Gottfried Herder and the Romantic Movement saw in the folk the idealization of the human being. The folk were innocent, genuine, simple, close to life and nature; not defiled by the state and by corruption. Jean Jacques Rousseau had a similar opinion: he wanted to educate the folk (by this he meant mainly peasants) because he believed that this stratum had to save the rotten and corrupted "court society." In the Romantic Movement, the idea of folk was almost equal to the desired Blaue Blume or at least its manifestation.

At the same time the confusing terms Volksgeist and Volksseele as creative powers were introduced and the discipline of Volkskunde suffered for a long time under these concepts. It went so far that Hegel made the Volksgeist a principle of historical, philosophical, psychological and metaphysical significance in his philosophy. In an illegal, anti-fascist periodical in 1934, Bertold Brecht suggested that the term "population" should be substituted for "folk."

After this short selection of subjective, personal and historically determined definitions and evaluations of the concept of folk, we have to face the question of an objective and scientific definition of folk. Hoffmann-Krayer, with his first lecture at the University of Basel in 1902, started a long and confusing discussion on the principles of Volkskunde and folklore with his formula that folk is vulgus in populo. M. Haberlandt and H. Naumann held a similar opinion, namely that folk is the lower stratum. Naumann in particular built his whole theory of the "sunken culture-goods" (gesunkenes Kulturgut) on this concept. R. Weiss, only partially opposed to Naumann's

theory, modified it by adding the theory of the "lifted primitive good" (gehobenes Primitivgut).

One of the first critics of Hoffmann-Krayer and his vulgus in populo theory was A. Strack, who maintained that the educated person is as much a part of the folk as is the uneducated. He stated in the Hessische Blätter für Volkskunde (1902:162):

Wenn in den vornehmsten Hotels, wo das Vulgus höchstens in Gestalt von Stiefelputzern verkehrt, die Zimmernummer fehlt oder die Frau Geheimrat X. in einer Gesellschaft Nervenzufälle bekommt, weil 13 zu Tische sitzen . . . oder das Frankfurter Bauamt unter Zustimmung des Magistrats, den Wünschen der Hausbesitzer Rechnung tragend, die Hausnummer 13 in verschiedenen Strassen ausfallen lässt, so wird sich die Volkskunde mit all diesem geradeso befassen wie mit den im Vulgus an die Unglückszahl sich knüpfenden Vorstellungen.

Already Strack understood by folk any group influenced by tradition. However, it was a long time until this thought became common: that folk is not only vulgus or the lower stratum of a nation.

In Europe the lower stratum was considered identical with the peasantry, the most conservative part of a nation. Also in Latin America the term folk was generally applied to rural groups. Two representatives of this application in relation to Latin America are Robert Redfield and George Foster. Foster (1953:163) makes it clear that in his opinion, "a folk society is not a whole society, an isolate, in itself. It is a 'half-society,' a part of a larger social unit (usually a nation) which is vertically and horizontally structured." Foster sees the folk as preindustrial and nonurban. Folk culture, as Foster defines it, will disappear with the progress of industrialization. In addition, Foster denies that folk culture exists in countries like the United States, Canada, England and Germany.

Does this mean that in these countries the folk lives in something other than its culture or that there is no folk at all? Foster's definition might be a nice model, but it is not a very useful model. It does not work or at least is of no great help in dealing with any of the aspects of real people, since it is, by Foster's own admission, a theoretical abstraction, describing an isolated part of the continuum and not a structural one, drawn from data about actual societies. Furthermore, if we examine his criteria for including or excluding given communities, we see that it is the past of the community which is the crucial point--in other words, his category of folk is historical and not structural. This is why his type of folk is becoming increasingly rare. If he had formulated this theory a few centuries ago he would have had ample time and opportunity to use it. Unfortunately his theory has its own built-in death knell and his folk are dying out. It cannot help anthropologists or folklorists deal with all the other people of the world. Another weak point in this description is, in my opinion, that it does not lead to investigation of the mutual influences between folk culture and the surrounding urban society. Right now we have the possibility of observing formative factors and powers in Latin America, where industrialization seems to be in progress. A method of study involving both continuity and change seems to me to be more proper for studying folk culture than the study of a historical community which has already been formed.

However, it is not my purpose just to write a polemic against Foster's definition of folk culture. It seems that his paper has not had a very fruitful influence on American anthropology and folklore. The dilemma is especially difficult for folklore, because this discipline reveals in its name, its subject. If folk is what Foster says it is, then this discipline is already condemned to death before it has even really matured. In addition to this, there is then no place for folklore in societies such as the United States or Germany, since they have no folk and no folk culture. We actually do find very few attempts to investigate phenomena which should be covered by anthropology or folklore, such as Hallowe'en and other holidays, popular culture, etc. (There has been work in American folklore in general, but mostly oral literature.) Each of the disciplines which should be concerned with these contemporary and largely urban traditions, and I am thinking especially of anthropology, folklore, sociology and social psychology, manages to exclude them from its domain by limiting its scope by definitions such as Foster's. Does this mean that customs such as Hallowe'en are not a part of American culture or even of folk culture? Many scholars thus carefully avoid dealing with things like this and prefer to escape to areas and countries where by one definition or another they can find folk or primitive cultures.

As one can see, we do not gain much by defining folk in a sociological way, as all the above-mentioned scholars have done. By splitting a society into two or more strata, of which one or even none is folk, we narrow the scope and the object of the discipline. We abolish every kind of urban folklore, campus folklore, and many other types. The sociological definitions, which define folk as almost equal to peasant, were very often criticized, but never really revised or changed. In order to keep the discipline of folklore as folklore, and not as peasantlore, we have to attempt to redefine the concept of folk.

A few of the young American folklorists, notably Alan Dundes, have taken a major step toward a useful definition of folk in folklore. He will study as a folk group "any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor." It does not matter what the common factor is; it could be occupation, language, or religion, but it is important that the group will have some traditions. However, to him the main traditional part of folklore is the nature of the lore and not the folk. My criticism would be that we have to stress the traditionality of the particular group in the relation to a larger frame (e.g. nation), and that the lore, not only that which is orally transmitted, is only one of the possible expressions of a traditional group. (This still leaves the question "What is tradition?" open so that every scholar should find a reasonable way to confine the time span of tradition in regard to his study; it could be five years, one generation, or even more.) The real break with the traditional definition of folk in the sociological way came--as I see it--with Richard Weiss and his book Volkskunde der Schweiz (1946) and Hermann Bausinger and his book Volkskultur in der technischen Welt (1961).

Folklore deals with expressions, and expressions are created by human beings and their psychic attitudes. Thus, it seems very unsatisfying or even wrong to define the subject of folklore in a sociological or geographical way. It should be defined in a psychological way or, at least, it should be described in relation to psycho-emotional patterns of a culture or a society.

The definition of a lower stratum because of particular psychic attitudes (such as primitivity, associative thinking, lack of individuality, ahistorical thinking, etc.) seems to be impossible since every human being has more or less of these characteristics.

This means that we can no longer draw the borderline through a nation to separate folk from non-folk; we must draw this line through every single human being and split him up into two areas of psychic-mental behavior. One would be the area common to a group of people or a Gemeinschaft based on any kind of tradition, or in other words, this would be the "folk" in every single person. The other area would be the non-folk, individual part. So we have in every man two parts, long ago recognized: he is an individual as well as a zoon politikon.

The consequence of this is that folk is no longer a social group, but a way of behavior. The sociological definition divided the upper class or populus from the folk or lower class, or vulgus. The psychological definition divides the single person into an upper stratum of individual attitudes and the area of individual culture on one hand, and on the other, into a lower stratum of folk attitudes and the area of folk culture, which he shares with all or many of his society. The balance between the two areas is different in different persons, but we can categorize them into groups according to this balance as objects for folklore research, such as miners, students, peasants, teenagers, beatniks, Californians, etc.

Let me illustrate this with the following image: folk culture could be a sea. Everybody stands in it, but at different points and at different depths. One stands in the water up to his neck and another person only up to his toes. The person who is up to his neck in this sea of folk culture has a smaller area of individual culture; he is more determined and influenced by the folk culture than the person who participates only with his toes in the folk culture. The latter category could be said to contain the highly educated elite because they have to try to be objective--historical and free from traditional values; whereas the folk is ahistorical and influenced by tradition as a factor for regulating daily life, customs, beliefs, etc. On the other hand, everyone participates in the folk culture, even if it be only by using a manifestation of the folk culture such as the language with its pattern of thinking and feeling. The main characteristic of the "folk area" of an individual would be the adherence to tradition and to several communities (Gemeinschaften).

In every man then is a continuous tension between "folklike" (volkstümlich) and individual behavior. This is manifested in the products and the components of a particular culture (tales, folk art, folk music, jokes, etc.). That which is primarily a psychological problem when we consider individuals, turns to a problem of folklore in the extended sense when we consider the community. Also this tension between "folklike" and individual behavior is exactly the relationship between folk culture and the summed individual culture (fine arts, fine music, poetry, philosophy, etc.).

The elements of folk culture are the manifested drive of the common man for a community (Gemeinschaftsbindung) and the manifestations of the "eternal past," i.e. the adherence to and the determination by tradition and

its values. Hoffmann-Krayer labeled this as Gesamtindividualität and Naumann calls it the primitive Gemeinschaftskultur (naturally both meant it in reference to their own vulgus in populo theories). In the Anglo-American scholarship one of these determinating factors--the eternal past--is clearly revealed by calling those things with which folklore deals, "popular traditions" and "traditional beliefs, legends and customs." This does not mean that folklorists and cultural anthropologists should be exclusively historically oriented; on the contrary it means that they must investigate the tension between the traditional and progressive elements in the modern community and its new manifestations.

In consideration of all this, R. Weiss (1946:11) defined the discipline of Volkskunde (it also could be valid for folklore): "Volkskunde is the discipline dealing with the folk life. The folk life consists of the mutual relations between folk and folk culture, as far as the mutual relations determined by Gemeinschaft and tradition." With the definition, we no longer have to escape with romantic lamentations to the last peasants somewhere, who are condemned to die; this definition of folk even enables us to study the folk in our highly developed cultures, consisting of many overlaid strata, because in these cultures too, the factor of Gemeinschaft and tradition is an extant, formative power.

We have to look then at two things: at the folk and at the products of a modern folk culture. As the single person is faced with many different cultural products, the folk is faced with the folk culture. The relation and the correlation between man and product, between folk and folk culture, are the folk life.

How this definition could be applied and how one should work with it can be illustrated with the phenomenon of folk belief and folk knowledge. The folk belief and the folk knowledge form the world view (Weltanschauung) in a culture. These two phenomena--folk belief and folk knowledge, as parts of folk culture, correspond to religion and science as parts of culture.

Religion has two parts in every individual: the individual belief in the upper stratum and the folk belief in the lower stratum. The individual belief is nothing else than the personal religious experience. The folk belief is piety and superstition with its categories of animism and magic. Everybody combines both parts in differing ratios.

The knowledge of the folk is the individual knowledge that comes from an independent scientific recognition based on tradition-free thinking, and common knowledge or popular knowledge with a good deal of error or misunderstood scientific results. These misunderstood results can also lead to a belief in magic, so that we have here a link between belief and knowledge. Each man can only be a specialist in one area; if he wants to know something else he has to believe what somebody else, a specialist in the field, found. However, in order for him to understand it, it has to be popularized and simplified, and very often it is still misunderstood, mainly because of transmission by mass media such as television, newspaper, radio, magazines, etc. Therefore folk knowledge is also not up to date; it is several years or decades behind actual scientific standards.

In the field of religion and science every man has his two areas of attitudes and sources, the individual and the folklike. (Here again we have a tension and this tension is released in the form of cultural expressions.) By this I mean a peasant, as well as a worker or a professor in fine arts, does not usually understand in general or in detail the most recent results and achievements in atomic physics or space technology. He knows something about it, but this could not be called scientific knowledge or understanding; it is in fact a simplified knowledge. In the end one must find out what the folk--not in the traditional sociological sense--knows about it, or what the folk knowledge on that topic is, in order to understand folk culture.

The purpose of this paper is to propose that we should define folk in a psychological manner, since everyone combines two attitudes in his personality: the folklike and the individual. (With the individual parts deal many disciplines: Music, Arts, Literature, etc.) The relationship of these two factors in an individual is usually shown by his place in a group in a society. By accepting this definition, anthropology, folklore, and Volkskunde would have a redefined frame of folk culture and its investigation. Also the scholars in these disciplines could relay their worried attempts to find and record the traditions of the last vanishing peasant groups. We could then pay our full attention to the factors that form folk culture, folk life and folk world view, which constantly arise out of the conflict of tradition and technical progress. By doing this we would be able to gain results that help us understand culture and human beings of the late twentieth century. As long as we have the sociological definition, the vulgus in populo, or have the dying peasant society as the subject of the discipline, we gain only very limited results, because we are doing mainly historical reconstruction, whereas we could be a social science with the characteristic of understanding the present.

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