

“From Folk Culture to National Culture.”

Report on a workshop held at the History Faculty, University of Oxford.

In April 2008 a score of scholars from Britain, Europe and North America attended a workshop held under the auspices of the Modern European History Research Centre (MEHRC), University of Oxford. The workshop was supported by the John Fell Fund, and organized by David Hopkin and Ollie Douglas. This was the first in a series of workshops whose overall ambition was to rethink those categories such as “community”, “nation” and “empire” that historians use to write the history of the nineteenth century. The specific aim of this workshop was to consider how the folk revival linked such categories, and at the same time to trace the influence of folklore on the arts and political ideologies of the nineteenth century. The emphasis was on post-Enlightenment and post-revolutionary identity politics as we considered how folklore collectors and theorists contributed to nationalist programmes, both political and aesthetic, although there was also an opportunity to consider the role of folklore within regionalist movements and multi-ethnic empires. Folklore’s connections to other political positions, both on the right and left, were investigated, as were its relationships to the development of social thought and the other social sciences.



A further explicit aim was to consider the role of the “folk” themselves in shaping identity politics both as informants (singers and storytellers) and producers (as material culture was prominent in papers on the Museon Arlaten and the Pitt Rivers Museum), but also as a public in an age of increasingly mass communication. It was the organisers’ intention to discover the limits to “the invention of tradition” that the material collected imposed. In practice this aim was not fulfilled and the emphasis was very much on the folklorists and their connections among elite political and literary groups.

This was an interdisciplinary event attended not only by historians but also art historians, anthropologists, and literary scholars. However, one of the purposes of the workshop was to ensure that academics in these fields were aware of trends in folklore studies, and so folklore scholars were prominently represented. Both folklore and history as an academic discipline emerged from the same romantic and historicist impulses that characterised the early nineteenth century, and both drew on the legacies of the Enlightenment and antiquarianism. If the subjects have gone their separate ways for much of the twentieth century, now that history has made a “cultural turn” it is time for them to become reacquainted.

The programme, list of participants and abstracts of the papers are available for download on the MEHRC website – www.history.ox.ac.uk/mehrc/folk.htm – so I will not repeat that material in this report. However, I do want to highlight some of the themes that emerged from the papers. The first was the interconnectedness of the folk revival project; nationalist impulses may have been at work but this was an international community of scholars. This was particularly apparent in Joep Leerssen’s examination of the Grimms’ network of correspondents, but also in Mary-Ann Constantine’s paper on La Villemarqué’s visit to Wales, and Clare O’Halloran’s exploration of Thomas Crofton Croker’s contacts among London antiquarians (both La Villemarqué and Croker also figuring among the Grimms’ correspondents).

The second theme was the ramifications of the folk revival in nineteenth-century culture, especially literary culture (it would have been useful to have more musicologists present given how vital music was to the consumers of culture in the period), and not only in the romantic period but equally within realism and modernism. Various papers cited the influence of folklore collecting on Goethe, Heine, Ibsen, Mistral, Maragall... Of particular interest was Terry Gunnell’s paper on the folkloric contribution to the development of national theatre in Iceland, which led to a discussion on similar projects in Ireland and elsewhere. The direct connections with political movements were less thoroughly explored than those with aesthetic movements, but rather the concept of “political cultures” was invoked. Folklore could be used to reveal (or create) a shared culture

among a defined people, and this shared culture became the basis on which claims to national difference, and national sovereignty, could be articulated.

Thirdly, questions were raised about the social basis of the folk revival and the relationship between cultural movements and other major trends in nineteenth-century history such as industrialisation, urbanisation, democratisation (or at least the spectre of it) and the development of a mass consumer public. Dorothy Noyes made a strong case for folklore as the bourgeois appropriation of working-class cultural labour, but in general the opinion of delegates was that the cultural construction of nations was interlinked with social and economic developments, but not dependent on them. The spread of cultural nationalism had its own dynamic. Nonetheless it was interesting to observe how many folklorists held occupations that were socially and professionally brokers between the “folk” and the upholders of classical traditions. Lawyers, doctors, customs officials, clerics, teachers, factory owners—often themselves unsure of their place in a shifting social order—they mediated between the village and, for example, the state.

The tension between an identification with the social groups from which they emerged and the social world in which they operated was one of the most interesting themes of the workshop. Such tensions came in many forms: urban anglophone Protestants searching for Irish identity among a Gaelic-speaking, Catholic and rebellious peasantry; a Breton Catholic traditionalist seeking communion with his Celtic brothers in non-conformist, industrialising Wales; a Habsburg prince compiling an ethnographic encyclopaedia; a Swedish-speaking elite imagining themselves at one with the Finnish people; Heinrich Heine attempting to reconcile his social and nationalist revolutionary aspirations; or the local resistance to government’s attempts to impose national narratives on regional museums such as Mistral’s Museon Arlaten (Museum of Arles) even though, as Anne-Marie Thiesse argued regionalism and nationalism were not necessarily opposed. Folklorists’ increasing commitment to a scientific approach conflicted both with the aesthetic demands of their audiences and with the romantic nationalist premises of folklore, an issue raised by Chris Gosden’s paper on Englishness within the Pitt Rivers Museum.

On a lighter note, workshop participants joined delegates attending the Museum Ethnographer’s Group (MEG) Conference for a drinks event hosted by the Pitt Rivers Museum and kindly supported by the Folklore Society. The MEG conference, entitled ‘Museum Ethnography at Home’, touched on similar themes, discussing nineteenth century material ethnographies relating to various parts of Europe including Britain, Germany, and France. The reception provided opportunities for the exploration of

interesting crossovers between the folklore movement and these complementary museum histories, as well as for additional interdisciplinary links. Such potential interconnections were further emphasized during a short tour of the Pitt Rivers Museum delivered to workshop participants prior to their formal dinner at New College.

It was always intended that the workshop would be a springboard for further research. The organisers are developing a project that would pick up on these tensions. We intend to concentrate on the period that witnessed the institutionalisation of folklore studies in societies and journals in the forty years before the First World War, the networks that formed around and through these institutions, and the relationship of folklore to other emergent academic disciplines, in particular the social sciences but also such subjects as philology and musicology, and even the biological and physical sciences. How did folklorists resolve the tension between ever more strident nationalisms and their commitment to a scientific approach? How did their engagement with informants shape their social thought? How did they connect not just with scholars but with the wider public? These are the issues we intend to set our mind to in the near future, but in the meantime we hope to publish the papers from this workshop (conjoined with the papers from a closely related conference held in Sheffield in September 2007 entitled “The Voice of the People”) under the title *Folklore and Nationalism in Europe during the Long Nineteenth-Century*. Watch out for this title in the Brill series “The National Cultivation of Culture”.