

'FROM FOLK CULTURE TO NATIONAL CULTURE'

Two-day workshop led by David Hopkin (Faculty of History and Hertford College), 11-12 April 2008, University of Oxford

Folklore, a nineteenth-century neologism, was central to the creation of post-revolutionary identities. Combining an Enlightenment desire for universal knowledge and classificatory systems with a Romantic assertion of cultural difference, it was the ideal science for emergent nationalisms and sub-nationalisms. In Eastern Europe and the Celtic west, claims to national status rested on the existence of a separate oral literature, whose preservation over centuries was proof of a general will to self-determination. Regionalism too, both in long established states such as France but also in newer and arguably over-centralised states such as Italy, drew on folklore as a justification for political autonomy. Collecting became a patriotic activity, and folkloric themes and styles informed new national and regional schools of music, literature, fine and decorative art, just as the language of cultural ethnicity informed the politics of nation and empire building

The process of collecting and classifying necessarily implies a hierarchy. Folklore can be seen as a form of internal colonisation, in which a middle-class desire to know and to order was accompanied by the desire to rule. Such arguments have certainly been advanced in India and other post-colonial societies, where folklore has been painted as the means to establish cultural difference between the ignorant and the educated, the rustic and the urbane, the primitive and the advanced. However, this overlooks the degree of real empathy between collector and informant, as well as the power of the material to reshape identity politics. The re-evaluation of the culture of the common man (and woman, and child), could have surprising outcomes. Among conservatives it nourished nostalgic visions of a pre-industrial, pre-modern order, but it could also promote more egalitarian political visions. In some cases the hierarchy became reversed, the authentic culture of the land, soil, family, was to be preferred over the effete cosmopolitanism of the educated elite. For every Nazi sword-dancer there was a Socialist morris-man.

Folklore's prominent role in nineteenth-century identity politics is surprising, given how seldom it gave support to assertions of clear-cut differences. Our assumption is that neither nations nor regions emerge as clearly defined cultural entities from the actual material collected by folklorists. Most tales, songs, and other forms of oral literature were readily diffused across boundaries (though the mapping of cultural ecotypes may have something to reveal). In this way the actual content mirrored the folklore movement better than the ideology. From Herder onwards, folklorists relied on the new communication technologies to form an international scholarly community, translating each other's works, swapping journals, attending conferences. At both the micro village level, and in the international Republic of Letters, folklore offers opportunities to rethink the relationship between established categories of analysis, such as community, nation and empire.