

Folklore and Nationalism The German Example and its Implications for the Balkans

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1. German Folklore (*Volkskunde*) of the period of the Third Reich has been studied – and often been quoted – as an example of the total corruption, perversion, and decline of a discipline. James Dow and Hannjost Lixfeld correctly titled their edition of a series of articles by German and Austrian scholars the *Nazification of an Academic Discipline. Folklore in the Third Reich* (1994). From the outside, the discipline seemed to thrive in those years: new chairs, institutes, archives, and museums were established, vast research projects were funded, numerous studies were published which reached larger than ever audiences, and the discipline was upgraded, respected, and deemed “important for the nation”. The above-mentioned book as well as other studies show, however, that Folklore (like several other disciplines) had to pay a very high price: that it had largely – and at times almost completely – surrendered its academic ethos and integrity, its theories and methodology, its institutions and most of its representatives to the intentions and policies of a totalitarian state ruled by a fascist party. In those days, “folklore mattered”, but hardly in the sense Alan Dundes had in mind in his studies of the impact of folklore (Dundes 1989). It mattered in an extreme, sometimes even deadly way for millions of people, giving legitimacy, and laying the “theoretical foundations”, to policies of expulsion and resettlement, of occupation and genocide of “alien” or “inferior” peoples, but also of hegemony, control or appeasement of the home population.

The National Socialist state, the party, and their institutions put folklore to various political uses – and by doing so proved that knowledge of the folk culture of a given people can be highly relevant. It was *applied folklore* or *applied ethnology* in the extreme sense of the word, but we must not be mistaken in the assumption that this utilization of folklore or this application of ethnographic knowledge was in any way unique or a novelty or that it was the last of its kind. In order to provide a clearer view of this, we have to apply a somewhat broader theoretical and historical perspective.

2. The use and application of “folk culture” presupposes at least two parties: the *folk* and their culture and those who utilize it, usually the *elite*. The exploitation of folk culture is thus based on the dichotomy between the powerful and the powerless, i. e., between some sort of elite, be it clerical, political, socio-economic, or intellectual (the “learned” in the words of Peter Burke), and the “common people”; and it implies yet another important dichotomy, that between the cultural

experts and the laymen. It is in the wake of 18th century Enlightenment, that mercantilistic feudal rulers or modern governments made the first systematic attempts to promote the study of the “folk” and its culture and to apply this (reflexive) expert knowledge about the “people” to the people themselves (cf. Heidrich 1984). Let us not forget that the very existence of folklore and ethnology, even the concepts of “culture”, “folk”, and “folk culture” derived from the needs of the enlightened modern state: a state that demanded expert knowledge about its population for the sake of rational and centralized planning. In addition, the new “nation states” required knowledge about those groups who were to constitute the ethnically defined nations and those who were not. The need of the modern state to acquire, and to apply, cultural knowledge was aptly formulated by the economist and folklorist Wilhelm-Heinrich Riehl as early as in 1858. Riehl envisioned a state policy and an administration that made wise use of ethnographic knowledge in order to rule the people in a way that they would accept this rule as natural (Riehl 1910: 214f); it is noteworthy that British colonial officers studied indigenous cultures with precisely this goal in mind. The expert knowledge gained by professional or amateur ethnographers was to benefit the people; if we add to this the earlier efforts of enlightened rulers and intellectuals to “improve the populace”, we can properly call them attempts at a systematic, centralized cultural management of the “folk” by the elites. Swedish ethnologists developed the concept of *centraldirigering* to express this idea (Erixon 1955).

3. The reflexive, intentional, and often skilful uses and applications of ethnographic knowledge could also be viewed as some kind of *folklorismus*, i. e., a use of folk culture for secondary purposes. In the case of *folklorismus* resulting from ideological, political or hegemonial interests (which are often closely connected), the use and exploitation of *folk culture* is usually guided by the ideals, intentions, and goals of the various elites, their policies being based either on sheer hegemonial or economic interests or on ideological premises – and sometimes on a combination of all of them.

Over the past 500 years of European history, there is a whole array of attempts at influencing or modifying the people through the “wise management” of their culture. Some of them have already been mentioned. Let me briefly survey the most relevant examples of cultural management of the “common folk” by the elites:

a. The first systematic and successful attempts at using and changing folk culture for ideological purposes were made by the major monotheistic *religions*, particularly by the Catholic Church and later by other denominational churches and institutions. From the Middle Ages, their goal was either to fight heresies at home (like Protestantism), or to proselytize and do missionary work abroad among pagan indigenous peoples. Dietz-Rüdiger Moser (1981) has produced ample evidence of the skilful use of folk songs and folk narratives by the educated clergy, particularly by some catholic orders, in the time of the Reformation and

the Counter-Reformation. The example of the churches was later followed closely by others as a model.

b. In this context, one should also mention the European *colonialization* of other continents which – for hegemonial, religious, and economic interests – often included the study of indigenous “primitive” cultures and languages and the use of this knowledge to hold a better sway over them – and for turning them into devout Christian subjects.

c. The efforts of the educated elites in the period of *Enlightenment* were more systematic and they were more comprehensive. The goal of popular enlightenment was the improvement of the “lowly classes”, the education of the entire society to bourgeois values, to a more rational life style, to discipline and economic thinking. As Beate Heidrich has shown in her study of ‘Feast and Enlightenment’ (1984), the enlightened elites of some European countries made very serious attempts at changing large sectors of the everyday culture of the “common people”, including the change of the entire calendar of festivals, customs, and rituals.

d. The ideas of Johann Gottfried Herder, but more so those of the Romanticists, led to the concept and the ideal of the *nation-state*. The formation of nation-states, however, presupposes a definition of the people constituting that nation. In most European countries, the nation was defined on ethnic or on cultural grounds. “Folk”, “ethnic group” and “folk culture” thus became crucial concepts of highest political relevance; folk traditions had to be studied or, if necessary, to be “worked over” or even to be invented (cf. Hobsbawm 1983, Löfgren 1989) to shape a national culture out of a host of ethnic, regional, and local subcultures. The focus on the *own* vs. the *other* cultures inevitably led to national exaltation, chauvinism, and nationalism. For the sake of cultural homogeneity within the nation, cultural differences with the neighbouring peoples were amplified and exaggerated at the expense of common cultural traits. The processes of nation building in the Balkans are a very convincing case in point (cf. Gellner 1996: 115 f.).

e. The *totalitarian states* of the 20th century ruled by nationalist or fascist parties, with their goals of absolute political control over the population and of hegemony over other peoples, must be placed in a separate category. Their use of folk culture and of the relevant academic disciplines was extreme and will be dealt with in more detail.

f. There is no denying, however, that the approach of the *totalitarian socialist states* ruled by Communist Parties to the “folk” and to “folk culture” closely resembled that of the nationalist totalitarian states. Their far-reaching goal of creating a “new socialist man” or a “fully developed socialist personality” required a total cultural management (cf. Hadžinikolov 1979, Lane 1981, Sanders 1983, Magnusson 1987, Roth 1990). Although based on other ideological premises, the socialist cultural management shows a surprising similarity with the respective policies of the nationalist states, even in details and in the phrasing. In

both cases, the entire way of life of whole populations was to be changed radically to fit political-ideological goals and needs.

g. Finally, the use of elements of folk culture in our *modern capitalist societies* has to be mentioned, usually and predominantly for commercial gains, but also for political and ideological goals. Although many of us may subscribe to these goals of market economy and of pluralistic, democratic societies, we must nevertheless be aware that again folk culture is put to various uses, be it in advertizing, tourism, the media, or in politics (e. g. national or regional interests in the European Union).

4. The ideological utilization of Folklore in the Third Reich can thus be considered to be part and consequence of a long tradition, a tradition based on the previous experiences of religion, colonialism, Enlightenment, and the idea of the (ethnically defined) nation-state. The latter produced the Romantic search for the “soul of the people” (*Volksseele*) and the quest for the indigenous, the “folk”, and for “roots”. These processes were largely a result of the processes of modernization, industrialization, and urbanization which disembedded millions of people and greatly affected their everyday lives; they produced that yearning for community and the obsession with the peasantry and traditional life which the totalitarian regimes so skillfully exploited.

The role of Folklore in the Third Reich was characterized, as Hermann Bausinger noted in 1965, by “the absolute priority of political-ideological practice over any attempt at theoretical, neutral, or objective understanding” (Bausinger 1994: 25). The ideological and theoretical foundations of Nazi Folklore are heterogeneous, eclectic, and partly contradictory. Both its ideology of the “folk” and its perceptions of “folk culture” dated from the 19th century – with a few addenda of the early 20th century. Bausinger (1994: 14–24) has outlined the basic ideological emphases and “theoretical” premises which I will briefly indicate. They were

- the *national emphasis*. The nation was the unifying principle, overriding all ethnic, tribal or regional divisions and subcultures and stretching even beyond national boundaries to all Germans living abroad in so-called “language islands”, most of them in East and Southeast Europe¹.
- the *racial emphasis* with the superior Nordic race as the unifying principle for the nation-state. The Nordic race was identified with all Germanic or Teutonic peoples and the superiority of their ethnic or national character was made a cornerstone of Nazi politics.
- the emphasis on the *peasantry*. The peasants were considered to represent the purest heritage and continuation of (ancient) Germanic culture².

¹ On the critique of the Folklore of these “language islands” (*Sprachinselvolkskunde*) cf. Weber-Kellermann 1967.

² For a thorough critique of the “premise of Germanic continuity” stretching over millennia v. Bausinger/Brückner 1969.

- the emphasis on the *community*, either on the village community (*Dorfgemeinschaft*) or the national community (*Volksgemeinschaft*). The concept of community was closely related to that of a (biological) organism and excluded (social) conflict.
- the emphasis on Germanic *mythology* and *symbolism*. Guided by this orientation, Nazi Folklore had to contribute to the production of a kind of secular *ersatz* religion and cult that was to encompass the entire social life of the individual and the community.

Folklore was at the very centre of National-Socialist thought. The rise of the academic discipline after 1933 becomes evident in the growth of the existing research institutions, archives (like the Weigel Symbol Archive, cf. Brednich 1994), documentation centres, museums etc., and the foundation of two major research institutions on a national level, the “*Amt Rosenberg*” (Rosenberg Bureau) and the “*SS Ahnenerbe*” (SS Office of Ancestral Inheritance), devoted to “special” research tasks (Oesterle 1994). Several university institutes and chairs of Folklore were installed in Germany and Austria, some of them (like Eugen Fehrle at Heidelberg University, cf. Assion 1994) very actively involved in teaching and promoting racist ideology. It has to be pointed out, though, that quite a number of folklorists did not participate in, or even resisted, the policy of the Nazi party, so that some scholars speak of “two Folklores” in Germany at that time (cf. Bollmus 1987).

“The weight assigned to folkloric conclusions is determined by their usefulness and their practical application,” wrote Bausinger (1994: 25). Folklore was singled out to preserve a “racially pure folk-nation” and folklorists had to understand that they were “co-creators and ... conscious co-defenders of German purity”. The organic renewal of German folk culture had to be organized and planned, the “organizing” of folk culture usually being explained as a developmental phase; or, in the words of Hans-Friedrich Geist:

“Now we have arranged festivals, celebrations according to the guidelines, the printed and copied forms of veneration. That is the necessary transition. The folk must now be liberated from their creative indifference through the revival of old forms and new ones wisely applied” (1934: 222).

Folklore as an academic discipline was deeply entangled in the creation of this “new folk culture” derived from (purportedly) ancient Germanic roots. The consequences for everyday life were quite visible and palpable in those years, and they concerned to a large extent the entire system of holidays and festivals, be it Christmas (cf. Gajek 1990), midsummer mountaintop fires, Mayday Parades or other “ancient customs and rituals” as occasions where the ideas of national-socialism could be instilled in the population. The “research projects” and “findings” of folklorists endowed all these political uses and exploitations with academic seriosity and legitimacy.

5. After the end of the Second World War and of Nazi rule, Folklore was – because of the infamous role it had played – in danger of being dissolved altogether. Fortunately this did not happen and the discipline survived at a number of universities and research institutes. As late as the 1960s, a new generation of German folklorists began to investigate seriously the involvement of their discipline in the terror of Nazism (cf. Emmerich 1968, Gerndt 1986, Dow 1994, Jacobbeit 1994).

One of the legacies of the political and ideological utilization of folklore in Germany was a lasting dread of the use and “application” of ethnographic knowledge for whatsoever purposes. This attitude has its parallel in the dislike of *applied ethnology* resulting from the political utilization of ethnology in the colonisation of non-European countries.

The political situation in the cold war period was characterized by the predominance of two opposed political and military systems – and by the absence of nationalism. After the downfall of socialism in East and Southeast Europe and the “end of systems” (Axt 1993), and in the face of growing globalization and international interdependence, the situation in Europe (and the world) has changed dramatically. The collapse of the socialist system has generated a social and economic instability comparable to that of the economic crisis around 1930. Wide-spread poverty and insecurity and the social disembedding of millions of people have led to regressions and to reactions and counterreactions like cultural fundamentalism and nationalism. As Péter Niedermüller (1996) has pointed out, new and exclusive identities and histories are being constructed by the ruling elites in the post-socialist Southeast European countries: they always include the dominant ethnic group and exclude the minority groups; interethnic tensions and even civil wars are the results of these tendencies, as the Yugoslav case clearly indicates. Again, nationalist elites make use of anxieties – and of folk culture (cf. Rihtman-Auguštin 1992). Ancient Slavic, Thracian, Hellenic or other mythologies and symbolisms, rituals and masks are utilized to construct identities; folklore festivals attain high political significance, and heroic epics and myths played an important role in the war in Bosnia (cf. Lauer 1994). Some of these policies – and the willing assistance of some Balkan folklorists – are reminiscent of the situation of the Third Reich.

6. What follows from the experience of nationalism and of folklore being instrumentalized for political goals? Or, as Helge Gerndt asked in 1995, what has our discipline learned from history? In times of crisis and rapid change, regressive nationalism and a yearning for the preservation of a supposedly better order with solid norms and values may help people escape from the pressing problems of daily life for short periods (Bausinger 1961: 42–53). However, as the examples of the Third Reich and of Bosnia have demonstrated, these regressions never solve problems, but create new ones.

Ethnology (or social anthropology) developed in countries which had colonies. From its beginning it focused on the study of *alien* and exotic, i. e., non-European “primitive” cultures. Folklore and ethnography, on the other hand, developed and gained legitimacy in the 19th century, the century of the formation of most European nation-states, as a “science of one’s own people”. The interest in the description, collection, study, preservation, and often exaltation of one’s *own*, national (peasant) culture were the main tenets of the discipline. This holds true for countries of the “second time zone” in Europe such as Germany and Italy, to use Gellners distinction (1996: 113–116), but even more so for the Balkan countries of the “third time zone” in Europe “which presented the greatest problems from the viewpoint of the implementation of the nationalist principle of *one culture, one state* ... Many of the peasant cultures were not clearly endowed with a normative High Culture at all” (ibid., 115). As a consequence, “nationalism began with ethnography, half descriptive, half normative, a kind of salvage operation and cultural engineering combined. If the eventual units were to be compact and reasonably homogeneous, ... many people had to be either assimilated, or expelled or killed” (ibid., 116). In the Balkan countries, folklore and ethnography have therefore been intricately linked to national politics – from the period of national liberation and nation building through the period of socialism to the present post-socialist period. They have always functioned as the explorers and representers of the “own” in a region of Europe where it always was, and still is, so extremely difficult to delimit the “own” from the “other”.

There can be no doubt that today, in our rapidly changing world, these orientations can hardly continue to guide our discipline. It can no longer be the task of folklore and ethnography to enhance ethnic or national self-awareness or to contribute to the mystification and glorification of native folk cultures at the expense of others. In other words: Folklore as an academic discipline must come to terms with its own past, a history rooted deeply in the 18th century idea of the nation-state. It seems evident that in view of the rise of nationalism and ethnic tensions in Southeast Europe it must change its paradigms. As a *European Ethnology*, it should study both the *own* and the *other* cultures in Europe, the cultures of the neighbours and ethnic minorities as well as those of more distant peoples and groups. It should become a science of the relations between the own and the other peoples and cultures, both of the quest for (national) identity *and* of the experience of cultural otherness (cf. Roth 1996). In the Balkan countries in particular, folklore and ethnology should contribute to the coexistence of ethnic groups and peoples.

Having the serious risks and dangers of *applied folklore* and *applied ethnology* in mind, most of us will feel uneasy at the thought of yet another application of cultural knowledge. Given the historical experience of nationalism and socialism, the fear that ethnologists or their knowledge will be used for an unethical cause is certainly not unfounded. However, the fear of misuse must not paralyze folklorists and ethnologists, because our societies are again plagued with social problems that

concern, and challenge, our disciplines in a very direct way. While, for a number of decades, it looked like ethnic conflicts were a matter of the past, we are now witnessing a growth of ethnic self-awareness and cultural fundamentalism, the “ethnification” of social and political conflicts, and a new nationalism and regionalism in many parts of Europe (cf. Köstlin 1994, Lindner 1994, Kaschuba 1995). If we add to this the impact of globalization on political, economic, and social life and the increased number of culture contacts in everyday life, it appears that cultural difference has again become a problem. Today, millions of people are, to an unprecedented degree, expected to manage cultural diversity in their everyday lives. Neither the people, nor the relevant disciplines seem to be prepared to actively contribute to the overcoming of the “cultural walls” and to the “reconciliation of differences” (Adorno 1951: 130). These problems concern Southeast Europe to a very high degree, in spite of its long history of interethnic coexistence and syncretism.

Folklore and ethnology have to tackle the problems and to openly discuss the ethical implications of the use of cultural knowledge. The utilization of this knowledge is necessary, but the ethics of application have to be defined in accordance with the new goals and tasks of the discipline. Its goals must be, among others, to use this knowledge to facilitate interethnic coexistence and to contribute to the better understanding between individuals belonging to different cultures; its task must not be to create or amplify national or ethnic antagonisms, but to reduce them and to develop strategies of handling cultural differences. The most immediate contribution in this direction would be the incorporation of *Intercultural Communication* into the discipline’s domains of research, teaching, and application (cf. Roth 1996a). Intercultural Communication is the science of the communicative interactions between members of different cultures, of the perception and interpretation of the “other”, and of the management of culture conflicts.

For these tasks folklore and ethnology are not only well-equipped, but as disciplines engaged in the study of cultures, they also have the duty to contribute to the solving of problems arising from cultural diversity and culture contact. Like no other discipline they can take into account both the specific historical conditions and the present complex ethnic and cultural situation in Europe. In view of the dark sides in the history of folklore and ethnology, this change of paradigms would certainly benefit both our disciplines and the people in a time when expert knowledge is very much needed, particularly in post-socialist East and Southeast Europe.

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Zusammenfassung

Volkskunde und Nationalismus. Das deutsche Beispiel und seine Bedeutung für den Balkan

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Die deutsche Volkskunde der NS-Zeit wird zu Recht als Beispiel für die totale Perversion einer wissenschaftlichen Disziplin angesehen. Denn während das Fach äußerlich gedieh, neue Lehrstühle, Institute, Museen und Archive erhielt, ein Millionenpublikum erreichte und von „nationaler Bedeutung“ war, verlor es gleichzeitig seine Integrität und ordnete seine Ziele und Theorien den Intentionen eines totalitären Regimes unter. Volkskundler waren mitbeteiligt an der Legitimierung von Vertreibung und Ausrottung „artfremder“ Völker ebenso wie an der Beschwichtigung und Kontrolle der deutschen Bevölkerung.

Der NS-Staat benutzte die Volkskultur und die Volkskunde in extremer Weise, doch war die Anwendung ethnologisches Wissens keineswegs neu. Die Instrumentalisierung der „Volkskultur“ basiert auf der Dichotomie Elite – Volk sowie auf der Kenntnis der Kultur des „einfachen Volks“. Schon früh hat die Kirche die Volkskultur manipuliert, doch erlangte die genaue Kenntnis der Volkskultur erst für die modernen Nationalstaaten und für die Kolonialmächte besondere Bedeutung, eine Tatsache, der die Volkskunde und die Völkerkunde letztlich ihr Entstehen verdanken. Erst die Aufklärung und die Romantik begründeten jenes "Kulturmanagement", das dann im 20. Jh. von totalitären Systemen perfektioniert wurde. Der NS-Staat (ebenso wie die sozialistischen Regimes) griff dabei massiv in die Alltagskultur ein und entwickelte u. a. neben Ritualen und Festen eine eigene nationale Mythologie als Ersatzreligion. Die Volkskunde übernahm als eine Staatswissenschaft politische Aufgaben, eine Tatsache, die nach dem Ende des NS-Staates fast zur Auflösung des Faches führte. Erst in den 1960er Jahren aber begann das Fach, seine eigene schmerzvolle Vergangenheit bewußt aufzuarbeiten.

Der Zusammenbruch des Sozialismus und die Globalisierung haben in Südosteuropa eine kritische Situation geschaffen, in der politische und andere Eliten in einigen Ländern versuchen, die Volkskultur für eigene Ziele zu instrumentalisieren und nationale Mythologien und „heile Vergangenheiten“ zu konstruieren, z. T. mit der Hilfe von Volkskundlern. Die (deutsche) Geschichte ebenso wie der Krieg in Bosnien lehren jedoch, daß regressiver Nationalismus keine Probleme löst, sondern neue schafft. Die südosteuropäische Volkskunde muß sich vom nationalen Paradigma lösen und von einer „Wissenschaft der eigenen Kultur“ zu einer Disziplin werden, die sowohl die eigene als auch die anderen Kulturen untersucht und die ihr Wissen in den Dienst des Zusammenlebens der Völker stellt und damit zur interkulturellen Kommunikation auf der Balkanhalbinsel beiträgt.