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Bendix, Regina

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## FINAL REFLECTIONS: “THE POLITICS OF FOLK CULTURE” IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

Regina Bendix \*

In his slender novel *Die Stimme* (The voice) of 1961, the German emigré author Walter Bauer, residing in Toronto, has his main character, an émigré like himself, show off his collection of records.

These here are folk songs, Russian, Polish – very beautiful, the Polish – German, American, from all kinds of people. Real folk songs, I mean, not pseudo stuff. Some of these are the oldest (records) in my collection... I will never forget the evening, I stood in my room, here, in a boarding house in Toronto – I was searching for something on the radio, and unexpectedly I heard one of these songs. It was as if something opened up in me, as if the ice was breaking. Suddenly this choir of girls’ and men’s voices sang, this song, a dance song, and that has always something to do with love, or at least often. The ice began to melt and not only because it was winter outside. By the way, I believe that folk songs sound even more beautiful if one hears them far from their soil and language, the longing in them becomes still more deep, the joy still more released, everything smells more deeply (Bauer 1961: 7, my translation).

The quote encapsulates some of the imagined history and the phenomenology of the practices explored in the conference “The Politics of Folk Culture: Reflections from the Lusophone World.” Folk song was indeed the first aspect of patterned, human creativity and expression that was latched onto, excised from the flow of life and turned into a cultural good available for ideological implementation. There are plenty of other cultural practices we engage in, but it has always been the aesthetically elaborated ones that were chosen for political and economic gain, because – and Bauer’s quote makes this patently obvious – they affect our senses and thus, to an extent, dampen our rational objections to the simplification entailed in this *pars pro toto* game. When our eyes, ears, nose and taste buds are ensnared and pleased, we waste little effort thinking about the system of production and the nature of rule under which these aesthetic practices reached their contours. This sensory

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\* Institut für Kulturanthropologie/Europäische Ethnologie (Georg-August-Universität, Göttingen).

component is often overlooked in efforts to deconstruct the politics of folk culture. In response to João Vasconcelo's initial critique on how anthropologists appear to be stuck in deconstructing the constructions of "folkness" or "culture," I would urge for a turn toward the sensorium, its role in nostalgia and the successful deployment of folk constructs in political movements. The sensory pleasures in the initial harnessing of folk practices were, for instance, present in Andrea Klimt's slides depicting the early activities of Portuguese in Germany. Once a regime of authenticity takes hold of such movements, the sensory pleasure appears to decrease greatly.

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Johann Gottfried Herder argued that folk songs were a part of ethnic culture that encapsulated and thus represented the whole: His collection of "Voices of peoples in song" (Herder 1807 [1774]) was a latent political manifesto and a building block for the growth of nationalism in Europe and, over the past two hundred years, all over the globe. It was written within a deeply emotional discourse that would become typical of romanticism and early nationalism and we find this rhetoric of deep emotion coupled with political program up to the recent past and the present – for instance in Richard Handler's 1988 study of the Quebecois deploying their folk dances coupled with fervent political rhetoric as evidence for cultural uniqueness and legitimate claims for national independence. And we find it, as a 2002 issue of the *Radical History Review* entitled "The Uses of the Folk" shows, in case studies from Haiti and Nicaragua. In the latter, Kathrine Borland, exploring the use of dance on the part of the Sandinista movement, concludes: "To claim to represent the folk is to claim an essence that offers powerful political legitimacy by identifying a social base. Folk dance as an embodiment of cultural style makes for a particularly powerful and ideologically flexible representational form" (2002: 102).

The "social base" and its linkage to aspirations of power or at the very least representations of power are at the heart of one kind of politics of folk culture. The definitional issue of who exactly is to be comprised within folk culture has been largely skirted – both in the papers presented in this conference and in the long history of the political deployment of the folk argument. The linguistic and the ethnogenetic arguments hover uneasily in the past, they are a component rhetorically invoked yet often far from the actual social base on whose behalf an elite is acting or a social base from within which activism rises.

In addition to the romantic nationalist echoes, reformulations, or subversions that have been documented in these papers, there are other very old traditions of harnessing folk culture that reemerge here, perhaps to one's amazement, in the 1990s. In Brazil's Santa Catarina one engages in 1993 in something called the *mapeamento cultural*. The political and cultural ambition here was surely rather different from the type of inventorying we encounter

in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, but mapping, charting, and inventorying are tried and true approaches to get a handle on the folk. We find such mapping efforts in early Spanish colonies, later applied to lesser-known regions within Spain and very successful adaptations thereof in absolutist France and later on in the Habsburg monarchy as well as tsarist Russia. What was sought was knowledge, hegemonic interest and – generally underestimated but so inherently part of the modern imagination’s way of dealing with the folk – economic gain: questions of taxation were one of the major reasons for early surveys, not self assertion and identity formation from within a group as we have heard about more prominently here. Absolutist regimes transformed collecting efforts on the part of the upper classes from a leisure pursuit with competitive elements (who can collect the most exotic items? the most textual variants?) into a more rigorous means of control and display. Rulers recognized that compiling data on the habits and beliefs of royal subjects could be very useful, and “cultural statistics” as practiced in various European kingdoms and principalities since the 18<sup>th</sup> century resulted in collections of folklore whose underlying purpose was to better understand and thus more efficiently rule over diverse subject populations. Both the politics of romantic nationalism and the method of keeping cultural statistics generated their own cultural practices. They are two to four hundred years old and they have rendered the reification and commoditization of expressive forms a “tradition” in and of themselves. As a result, the “folk” themselves have increasingly taken on a reflexive stance toward “folk practices.” In accordance with what Beck, Giddens and Lash term “reflexive modernization” (1994), dance turns into a performance of dance, foodways turn into representations of ethnicity. We observe consciously mimetic practices rather than fervent attempts at embodying folk roots – making folk traditions further more available to members not only within but also outside the group, as Robert Cantwell has so masterfully demonstrated (1993). António Medeiros showed this mimetic approach with the Galician case where artistic, playful allusions to a possibility of folkness is in evidence, rather than a full-blown ethnogenealogical claim for roots. The long history of a politics of the folk – which could be pushed back further in time – contributes to the semantic breadth that was especially evident in the case studies from Portugal. Changing political needs make use of the same repository of reified expressive culture.

The conference promised to look at the politics of folk culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but by necessity we find ourselves confronted with the divergent histories of these politics in the national, colonial, postcolonial and recent diasporic contexts. The “politics of folk culture” was the title, but I would argue that “the economics of folk culture” is a secret second perspective, which could inform a great deal of the cases. One does not even have

to resort to Bill Clinton's old election slogan, "It's the economy, stupid" to recognize how greatly entrenched economic interests and agendas are in the simultaneous and privileged agendas of identity bolstering and the politics of recognition. So while "the folk" or a folk-base remain central in a politics of recognition with or without aspirations of political power, things folk continue to lend themselves to commoditization and serialization. One might go as far as to say that even a failed politics of folk culture can lead to a successful commoditization of folk culture.

The conference sought to add to the field of the politics of folk culture through reflections from the lusophone world, bringing together a rich array of case studies. From these case studies we can, perhaps, nonetheless add insights to the broader discussion on the political economy of "folk culture." I would suggest doing this along two axes: 1) The instruments employed in reifying and thus making graspable folk culture; 2) The type of mobilization recognizable in different historical and especially sociopolitical contexts: who are the mobilizers or the agencies shaping mobilization? What kind of power is sought and what is ultimately possible? The former is relatively easy; the latter one can attempt to do by looking through the case studies available here. A third axis, which I will only skirt here, is morality. Ethnology, folklore studies, and cultural anthropology have deployed heavy doses of moral discourses, accompanying and co-shaping the politics and economics of folk culture and disentangling this entanglement goes beyond the reach of this comment.

### **Instruments for rendering folk culture graspable**

Inherent to the politics of folk culture is what the German scholar Konrad Köstlin has referred to as the desire for the simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous (1997). While not evident in all of the case studies presented, the assumption that folk culture is older, has tradition, and constitutes a kind of enacted marker of past life worlds is certainly part of some of the studies shown here. Exciting and offering potential for new insight here is the documentation of cases where expressive forms are explicitly considered "new," evolving and thus future-conforming. Every squabble between dance performance groups over the authenticity of what they perform invokes that assumption of having the capacity to bring a past life world into the present and thus anchoring oneself with a geopolitical past. But here we heard in the Azorean, the Cape Verdean and Newark cases presentist arguments. These differ substantially from the romantic-nationalist model where (imagined) past "folkness" was used as a resource for building a national future. In the present geopolitical situation, nation-states are losing ground vis-à-vis transnational economic development and attendant migrations. We keep

singing national anthems but dual citizenship, mobility within the EU or at least residence and work permits are an option that did not use to exist. In these shifting configurations of rights and possibilities, the “folk resource” is then also differently conceptualized and deployed. For instance, as again the Santa Catarina case indicates, ethnic or folk traits can be conceived as emergent and strengthening toward a collective future instead of needing to be restored from some kind of more authentic past.

The instruments of reification are listed below with no claim to completeness; naturally, within one politics of folk culture, several of these instruments will come together to shape an effective whole:

1. Collecting, categorizing, and itemizing (a strategy which was/is naturally also fostered within the study of culture).
2. Exhibiting – which is often combined with forms of staging.
3. Staging:
  - a. Performing: the power of performance is evident in many of the cases discussed and could perhaps be further elaborated. The amount of conviction that performance can generate in those doing the performing is a key aspect for the measure of conviction to be gained for a particular politics of culture.
  - b. The choice of performance space: choosing a park like setting as in the Galician case or a museum as in the Hamburg case will have an enormous impact on the aesthetics and thus the politics the event communicates.
  - c. Carnivalization: this one might term a “hyper staging,” with the example of the German capital Berlin being quite instructive; here, all ethnicities/immigrant groups interested in participating may participate in the carnival of culture (which happens not at lent but in the summer – where once again economic gain is hoped to be better than during the freezing winter time). In this context, groups are then to show reified aspects of their culture in performances and parades and they receive, even through the name of the event, the sanction to show their cultural difference during a set apart, liminal space and time. What is being shown is, however, not what one might term “carnavalesque” in ritual scholarship, but rather essentialized and aesthetically enhanced aspects of culture. The Malaccan case points in this direction.
4. Recording: in the long history of the politics of folk culture, recording is a relatively recent possibility (plus minus one hundred years). It addresses the ear, its sensory excitability and is thus a very crucial instrument within the politics of folk culture. There are a lot

more people who consider themselves entitled to opinions in the messy discussion around Ethnic and World Music than for instance in the world of staged ethnic dance performance, because of the easy spread of recorded music and because of the established cultural practice of musical connoisseurship.

5. Internet: Paulo Raposo's case study provided another intriguing novelty in his inclusion of the Internet as a site of harnessing and shaping the look and nature of a folk practice. That Internet representations can also be powerful emotional stimuli was equally evident here – and naturally, the Internet is also one of the new mobilizing agents.
6. Inventing: the case of the *Senhora do Minho* is a fine example of how invention can be discursively established and how discourses simultaneously can be employed to hide this invented nature.
7. "Hybridizing" or métissage could be considered a further type of invention, but its politics and discourse differ from those of "invention" (hybridity is a problematic term with its linkage to genetics, but this is not the place to fully settle on an appropriate term; hybridity has been introduced in 1990 by Nestor García Canclini and has been used by others, and this is the lineage intended here). The Malaccan example engages in hybridizing without fully disclosing the politics involved; by contrast, both the Santa Catarina and the Cape Verdean cases acknowledge the power of invention and hybridizing. While this instrument is not as far from the national claims one might wish it to be, it is a distinctly different kind of argument than the usual "folk culture" or "heritage" argument with its yearning for essence and purity.
8. Selling: all the instruments listed are open to the market. Selling reified "folkness" can accompany its political deployment. In many instances, in particular in touristic settings, commoditization occurs without attended political mobilization, not least as within tourism and heritage marketing, the serialization of salable icons and replicas of traditional cultural belong to the "branding" process involved in building up a destination.

## Types of mobilization

Today we work as a matter of course from the theoretical position that while identity may foreground issues of descent and even genetic heritage, identity formation is a matter of choice, selection, strategy and manipulation, open to shifting interests, no matter how thick the rhetorical layer of authenticity

and immutability. This is not to deny that for many individuals, a thorough belief in an immutable and authentic sense of identity and thus belonging may be of paramount importance. But every important study of especially ethnic but also national identity from Frederic Barth onward to Markus Banks and Benedict Anderson demonstrates the necessarily constructed and chosen nature of identity.

The “necessity” of a folk cultural politics is not self-evident to all individuals. Rather, there are actors and agencies that invest themselves into foregrounding the potential of such a politics and work toward mobilizing a larger population for this cause. Different types of mobilizers and mobilization strategies are in evidence in these case studies:

1. A passionate, identifiable individual: the archetypical case for this type of mobilization is Mistral and the work he did in the Provence from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century through the early 20<sup>th</sup>. But several of the cases presented contain this form of mobilization as well. For the maintenance and even growth of the *caretos* in Podence, one enthusiastic individual chose the route quite typical for Europe since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. He founded a voluntary association, which now carries this calendar custom and manages the masked performances interface with local and transregional interests, including tourism. The highly self-conscious management is evident also in the custom bearers’ involvement of an anthropologist as *consultant* – in earlier times, academics might have been brought in as experts or they were the mobilizers or “saviors” of “dying customs” themselves. Father Alves and other catholic authorities, too, can be identified as individual agents involved in the “pilgrimage under construction” in Northwestern Portugal.
2. A political force in power may use its resources to foster and strengthen a particular politics of folk culture. That such a politics may linger and remain in customary use even after political change was demonstrated in António Medeiros’ examples from Minho, Portugal.
3. A political force that would like to be in power: the classic cases of romantic-nationalist movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries can be recalled here. But the Azoreanist movement in Brazil is also an obvious example, although the market connection is also very blatant here, as the labeling of industries and business as Azorean seems to be reaching proportions reminiscent of “the branding of Scotland” here.
4. A social class: the Malaccan upper Tens’ eventual relenting to embrace “the folk” belongs into this category. The creative merging of



Portuguese and Malaysian styles under the heading of a Portuguese Settlement heritage site builds on the complex interface of class and status differences on the backdrop of economic opportunity.

5. Entrepreneurs: given the power of the economics of folk culture, entrepreneurship, to some degree, turns out to be a mobilizing force in all of the studies presented. While the Cape Verdean musicians depicted by Timothy Sieber may follow their individual agendas, aspirations to be heard and heard widely also bring about a merging with entrepreneurial agencies. The masked *caretos* increasingly require entrepreneurial support and management in order to schedule their appearances at home and abroad and alongside the spirit of performance awakens a spirit of economic gain.
6. Local, regional, and national policies: this not very visible mobilizing and shaping force was particularly evident in the Portuguese-American and German-Portuguese cases which simultaneously also form parts of the recent diaspora. The Portuguese in New Jersey studied by Kim Holton profit from a recent policy of selective acculturation, which allows individuals to selectively display their national belonging on either continent. Andrea Klimt observed a complicit arrangement between host-national institutions (here a museum) and ethnics or foreign nationals in Germany. As a nation-state – here Germany – seeks to come to terms with new cultural demographics, cultural policies develop that experiment with “folk culture” or “tradition.” Yet the Malaccan case, too, took the shape it took at the time it took place due to a new Malaysian policy.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the politics of folk culture as illustrated with examples from the lusophone world illustrate: 1) A growing repertoire of instruments of reifying folk culture alongside a growing reflexivity among those engaged in the reification processes; 2) A bewildering spectrum of agents and agencies involved in mobilizing folk resources for a politics of folk culture.

Just as various instruments may get combined in a politics of folk culture, so different kinds of mobilization strategies may be combined or follow upon each other. But omnipresent in all cases is potential economic interest. As Margaret Sarkissian’s Malaccan case study demonstrated, making money and having a source of income is a major source of identity. If it is not fishing or farming or mining why should it not be demonstrating one’s ethnicity or “folk roots,” however constructed? While some of Sarkissian’s younger

informants made no bones about this economic benefit, there are other cases where the “morality factor” impedes a crude economics of folk culture. The Galician BNG’s distaste for “folkloristic trash” and its own stylization of a more “hip” folkness point to the frailty of capitalizing on reified culture on a long term basis. Some actors will make differences between clearly bounded constructs such as heritage sites and a felt but not merchandised cultural base. Others will see all reification and commoditization processes as part of a big, postmodern game, while yet others, in dire need of a politically salient social base, may revert to a traditional politics of folk culture.

Alongside such processes, the economics of folk culture have risen to be a hotly debated issue in international legal realms such as the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). The desire among some constituencies to develop copyright law for “tradition” and “folklore” brings new discourse models and new actors into the politics of folk culture arena. While these ramifications were blissfully absent in the work presented here, they are what we have to turn our attention to if we do not want our fields of inquiry to be increasingly closed off by lawyers.

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