American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics, 1927–1957

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Folklorists have a tendency to suppose that the materials of folklore are their own private preserve, to be collected, classified, and analyzed as they see fit. Yet their raw data, by its very nature, is public, and so available to the world at large. Groups that have exploited folklore materials have done so for many reasons—to boost regional pride, to ease the burdens of work, to achieve economic gain, and to influence politics. The con-
conscious use of folk songs and other traditional lore for political purposes is as old as recorded history. Documented in every type of social organization from the most primitive to our complex and sophisticated society, folklore is used as a cohesive force to maintain and reinforce social institutions, including the structure of government. This is easiest to see in nonliterate societies, where war chants, songs of historical events, genealogies, praise intonations, and ceremonial feasts all contribute to maintaining authority. In Old China, emperors regularly gauged the sentiments of their people from folk songs collected for this purpose. During Reconstruction, the Ku Klux Klan attempted to reassert white supremacy in the South partly by playing on the superstitious fears of unschooled ex-slaves.

But literacy doesn’t diminish the political power of folklore. The origins of folklore study are deeply rooted in the political aspirations of the European romantic nationalism movement of the nineteenth century, when politically suppressed peoples collected local folk songs and tales in an effort to preserve and restore an ancient cultural heritage that could serve as an ideological prop in the struggle for national independence. The work of the Grimm brothers of Germany, Elias Lonnrot in Finland, and many other acknowledged pioneers of academic folklore were inspired by and capitalized on such nationalistic fervor.

Governments from across the political spectrum have utilized folklore as a stabilizing, unifying, and sometimes oppressive tool to support ideological positions and maintain power. Those that we recall most vividly are those that seem the least benign: Hitler’s social scientists used Germanic folk traditions to glorify the myth of Aryan supremacy and build the legend of the Führer. Stalin reshaped existing Russian folklore to exploit the creativity of the peasantry and link the revolution of 1917 with earlier revolts. Haiti’s late dictator, François Duvalier, cowed a superstitious populace with voodoo. Governments of Ireland, India, Egypt, Ghana, and Pakistan have sponsored folklore research with heavy nationalistic overtones and more than a touch of patriotic bias.

By contrast, at least until the 1980s, folklore and folk songs were given relatively little recognition by the U.S. government. Theodore Roosevelt was probably the first American national public official to focus attention on traditional materials. His thumping endorsement of John A. Lomax’s *Cowboy Songs* (1910) appeared as a frontispiece and helped the book become a classic.

But it was not until 1928 that the national Archive of American Folk Song was established as a section of the Music Division of the Library of Congress, and then only as a result of private donations. The archive’s period of greatest expansion of holdings occurred in the 1930s under John A. Lomax, an enthusiastic field collector and talented administrator with good Washington political connections. Only in 1937 did Congress finally appropriate funds to cover one administrative position for the archive.

By any standard, the New Deal gave folklore its biggest boost to date in support from government. A number of high-ranking officials in the Franklin Roosevelt administration genuinely liked traditional music and found it a pleasant duty, as well as good “down-home” politics to encourage the collection and performance of folk music. President Roosevelt himself was fond of fiddle music and occasionally invited string bands to entertain at his retreat at Warm Springs, Georgia. One such group was waiting at a party to play for him the day he died.

Eleanor Roosevelt, too, was an enthusiast. She attended or sent greetings to a number of regional folk festivals in the 1930s and invited folk singer Josh White to perform at the White House. When the king and queen of England visited the United States in 1939, the Roosevelts, assisted by musicologist Charles Seeger, treated Their Majesties to a well-received, foot-stomping hoedown by a Nashville square dance troupe and a traditional hillbilly band.

Rexford Tugwell, Harold Ickes, Henry Wallace, and many lesser officials in Roosevelt’s administration also were known to appreciate indigenous music. Folk music rang out at house parties all over Washington; the field recordings of John Lomax and the guitar playing of his son Alan were heard at many a social evening where politicos gathered.

But the New Deal contributed more than this informal encouragement. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) sponsored folklore fieldwork that even today informs folklore scholars’ endeavors. Some fieldworkers sent by the Resettlement Administration were trained to use traditional music to help in the social integration of new communities. Cultural exchange programs, particularly those of the Pan-American Union, frequently relied on folk songs and dances.

Beginning in 1936, the Folklore Studies section of the Federal Writers Project (FWP), later the Joint Committee on Folk Arts, made extensive field recordings of folk songs and supplemented their popular geographic guides with indigenous folklore. Reminiscences and folk narratives from interviews with ex-slaves, collected under the aegis of the FWP, were later excerpted and published as *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery* (1945), by B. A. (Benjamin) Botkin, who succeeded John Lomax as director of the WPA folklore project. A conservative war Congress terminated the WPA in 1942, but before its doors were closed, large field collections of folk materials had been made in twenty-seven states. Resultant publications included a number of regional folklore anthologies and song collections, as well as *Lay My Burden Down*.

While professional folklorists benefited from WPA activities, the New Deal’s approach to folklore was decidedly humanitarian rather than
academic or political. As Botkin said in 1939, the WPA goal was to “give back to the people what we [collectors] have taken from them and what rightfully belongs to them. . . . The WPA looks upon folklore research not as a private [function], but as a public function and folklore as public, not private property.”

For nearly two decades following the Roosevelt era, the U.S. political establishment paid only haphazard attention to folklore and folk songs. The State Department occasionally sponsored foreign tours by American folk singers as part of its cultural exchange series. A few historic American “folk heroes” such as Paul Bunyan and Johnny Appleseed appeared on U.S. postage stamps. More recently, national and state governments, Smithsonian Institution, and state offices of folklife studies have sponsored quite extensive celebrations of folk traditions. Indeed, the U.S. Postal Service issued a four-stamp series commemorating folk singers Woody Guthrie, Huddie (Lead Belly) Ledbetter, Josh White, and Sonny Terry in 1998, and the Smithsonian Institution launched a traveling exhibit of Woody Guthrie memorabilia in 1999.

Even during the folk song revival of the 1960s, although many members of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations were folk song aficionados, precious little official governmental support for folklore was evident. In 1966, the Department of Interior and its then-secretary Stuart Udall honored folk bard Woody Guthrie for his song compositions on behalf of public conservation. An annual two-week folk life festival sponsored by Smithsonian Institute has been held on the Washington Monument mall each summer since 1968, including a summer-long folk culture exhibition during the 1976 bicentennial celebration.

But no significant new federal government institutional support for the study or performance of American folk traditions developed until a seven-year campaign was begun in 1969 by Senators Ralph Yarborough of Texas and J. William Fulbright of Arkansas. Their Senate Bill S. 1591 in the Ninety-first Congress became law in 1976 as the American Folklife Preservation Act, calling for the establishment of the American Folklife Center to “preserve and present American folklife.” The Archive of Folk Culture, an extensive repository of American folk music, is part of the center’s collection. Because they occupy a place as one section of the Library of Congress, the American Folklife Center and its archive continue to provide a stable, productive focus for the study and dissemination of folklore traditions.

Also in the 1970s, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) initiated regular funding of film and sound recordings to capture and preserve folk traditions. In 1982, the NEH Folk Arts Program began honoring distinguished folk artists with annual National Heritage Fellowship awards. And some
move conscious adherence to rote reproduction from a fixed original. In other words, the item must live apart from books, newspapers, phonograph records, tapes, or any other frozen form. And as the song or other traditional item is thus passed on interpersonally, this “folk process” inevitably produces variations, whether regional, ethnic, occupational, or social—much like the children’s game of “telephone,” in which a phrase repeated many times winds up significantly changed from its original form and meaning.

Given this definition, “The Star Spangled Banner,” despite its long history, is not a folk song because it continues to exist in only one textual and melodic version, and until recently it was performed in only one socially acceptable style. Songs written by Bob Dylan and the Beatles likewise would not be classified as folk songs by folklorists, since they don’t exhibit changes by the community; their performance life and poetic and musical structures as yet are bound up with media dissemination, which freezes their shape and format even as it endlessly reproduces them.

On the other hand, many urban children’s street songs, military barracks obscenities, and college and occupational parodies (even of Beatles’ songs) are traditional even though they may have a history of only a few months. The academic term folk song properly applies to many rural Carolina love songs, sea chanteys, a few early composed hillbilly pieces (“The Death of Floyd Collins”), Mississippi Delta blues, and ballads on nearly every conceivable subject. Whatever their authorship, these folk songs come in numerous versions and owe much of their existence to oral circulation. Many folklorists define folklore and folk song not by content, style, or aesthetic preference but as the end result of a particular type of communication process.

**UTILITY OF PROPAGANDA SONGS**

The “discovery” by members of some communist and other left-wing groups in the 1930s of folk song as a convenient propaganda tool was hardly original. As John Greenway, Philip Foner, David Dunaway, and others have documented, Americans have always enlisted songs of persuasion on behalf of political and social causes. The colonists bedeviled Britain and lauded each other in broadsides. Their descendants wrangled over slavery in hymns and marched off in half a dozen wars to propagandize rationales in four/four time. Social reformers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries took their stand at Armageddon and battled in song for the Lord, the eight-hour day, populism, temperance, and women’s suffrage.

One remarkable singing group, the Hutchinson family of New Milford, New Hampshire, toured the country for thirty-five years (1841–1876), performing topical compositions in the name of numerous causes, such as temperance and the abolition of slavery. The labor movement from earliest times has voiced its complaints and solidarity in song. Most political campaigns from John Adams’s to George Bush’s have featured partisan music as well as platitudinous oratory.

“Give me the making of the songs of a nation,” wrote the political philosopher Andrew Fletcher in 1703, “and I care not who makes its laws.” Legend has it that General Robert E. Lee, hearing union soldiers at Appomattox singing “Rally Round the Flag, Boys,” commented, “If we had had that song, we’d have won the war.” Ironically, the same song was a staple of the Weavers when they were tossed out of work in the 1950s on charges of abandoning American patriotism in favor of radical left-wing sympathies.

It is no accident that folk song (rather than folk tale, legend, or proverb) was the first traditional genre discovered by the Left to have propaganda value. Adding music to words espousing a cause creates a charged atmosphere of militancy and solidarity that is difficult to duplicate by speechmaking alone. Other means of performance, like theater and dance, were also employed early on for propaganda purposes, being equally evocative as music. But they were not as easy to master and perform as songs accompanied by simple instruments and so were less widespread as propaganda tools.

The political utility of songs of persuasion as rallying, reinforcing, and indoctrinating devices among American protest groups has spawned much impressionistic and explanatory commentary from observers throughout the years. R. Serge Denisoff, writing in the *Journal of American Folklore* in 1966, offers an analysis of six possible functions for protest songs (besides entertainment):

1. To solicit outside support and sympathy for a cause.
2. To reinforce the values held by those already active in a movement.
3. To promote cohesion and high morale within the protest organization.
4. To recruit new members for the organization.
5. To propose specific actions to solve real or imagined social problems.
6. To identify conflict or discontent in a society, usually in emotional terms.

Additional functions were later suggested by another scholar:

1. Marking the boundaries between the protest group and the outside world.
2. Counteracting despair when hoped-for change fails to materialize.
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Propaganda songs generally fall into one of two categories: the magnetic and the rhetorical. Magnetic songs attempt to woo the outsider to the movement or ideology or to promote solidarity among those already converted:

Are you poor, forlorn and hungry,
Are there lots of things you lack?
Is your life made up of misery?
Then dump the bosses off your back.

Or:

Oh, you can't scare me, I'm sticking to the Union
I'm sticking to the Union, I'm sticking to the Union
Oh, you can't scare me, I'm sticking to the Union
I'm sticking to the Union till the day I die.

UNION MAID
Words and Music by Woody Guthrie
TRO © Copyright 1961 (Renewed) 1963 (Renewed)
Ludlow Music, Inc., New York, NY
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The rhetorical song merely identifies and describes a real or presumed social crisis without offering an explicit solution in terms of action or dogma:

The farmer is the man, the farmer is the man
Lives off of credit till the fall
Then they take him by the hand and lead him from the land
And the middleman's the one who gets it all.

To suggest that a song has propaganda value or that it serves an agit-prop purpose does not imply something sinister or conspiratorial about those who sing it. Any group that believes sincerely in a cause—whether independence from England, abolition of slavery, promotion of labor unions, or Christianity, for that matter—is likely to use music to disseminate and promote its beliefs, because it works. That groups of people with similar social and political philosophies will gather to share the music for rallying purposes as well as aesthetic appreciation is to be expected.

The truly sinister notion—the one the House Un-American Activities Committee and Fire and Police Research Association of Los Angeles, Inc., tried to suggest—is that somehow the appeal of such songs is malevolent, secret, and designed to snare the unwitting into supporting things they would not knowingly support. For example, Woody Guthrie's song “Union Maid” certainly fits the agit-prop category. But its sentiments would be unlikely to deceive anyone. Like “We Shall Overcome,” or “If I Had a Hammer,” or “God Bless America,” “Union Maid” espouses a political agenda but an open and obvious one.

Without a doubt, propaganda songs vary in content, quality, and durability. Although a good tune certainly helps, the words in each case are paramount. A melody will function as long as it carries the lyrics without obscuring their content or contradicting their mood. For mass singing, tunes must be familiar to most participants or at least simple enough to be learned after one or two repetitions. That is why propaganda songs often resort to parody. With a few notable exceptions—“La Marseillaise” and “The Internationale,” for example—a new melody is seldom found among the better-known songs of any mass movement.

In the United States, the staple tune stock underlying most agit-prop lyrics derives from hymns, patriotic airs, sentimental popular tunes, as well as folk songs. Rural communities have tended to use a greater proportion of folk songs for topical and propaganda purposes than have urban groups, but only because of familiarity and not conscious intent.

Thus, the notion, developed in the communist movement, that the folk song idiom has exceptional aesthetic value as well as pragmatic utility is striking and unusual. It can be explained only by special ideological and historical circumstances rooted in the 1930s.

NOTES

4. See, for example, Christa Kamenetsky, “Folklore as a Political Tool in Nazi Germany,” Journal of American Folklore 85 (1972): 221-35.
5. For a photographic reproduction of Roosevelt’s letter, see the revised edition, Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads (New York, 1938), 1x-x. See also Nolan Porterfield, Last Cavalier: The Life and Times of John A. Lomax, 1867-1948 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996).
7. A photo of Franklin Roosevelt surrounded by country musicians at Warm Springs, Georgia, is reprinted in the liner notes to Songs of the Depression, sung
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by the New Lost City Ramblers (Folkways 5264). The group waiting to play for the president the day he died is mentioned in Bernard Asbell, When FDR Died (New York, 1961), 74–75.


2

Early Marxism and Folklore

The significance of propaganda song itself was understood from the beginning by all varieties of Marxists. Friedrich Engels wrote of their importance in a letter to Hermann Schlueter, a socialist contemporary, in 1885, though he chafed at the caliber of poetry in the lyrics. Socialist songs were sung in the streets of the Paris Commune in 1871. By the turn of the twentieth century, workers’ choral groups were singing across Europe and even in the United States.
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Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the director of a workers’ chorus in Lille, France, Pierre Degeyter, composed the music for “The Internationale,” which became one of the most widely recognized themes of the socialist movement for half a century. With its stirring, even melodramatic, opening lines, “Arise, you pris’ners of starvation! Arise, you wretched of the earth!” set to a compelling marching anthem, “The Internationale” has ignited the passions of several generations of rebellious protesters. It yielded the title for one of the most important Marxist works of the latter half of the twentieth century, The Wretched of the Earth by Frantz Fanon, an Algerian revolutionary and social theorist. Fanon’s book influenced the decision of many African and some Asian leaders to choose Marxist models for their countries’ first postcolonial governments.

Song collections devoted to socialism and the cause of the proletariat soon made their appearance, among the earliest in English being Chants of Labour (London, 1888), edited by Edward Carpenter. Lenin in exile sought contact with the proletariat by occasionally venturing out to the cafés and theaters of suburban Paris to listen to revolutionary songs. As the Bolsheviks moved toward national power, Pravda printed “The Internationale” in its first issue. In its sixth issue, March 11, 1917, there appeared an article in bold type entitled “Revolutionary Songs,” saying, “We call [to] the attention of the comrades, that it is desirable to organize collective singing and rehearsals of choral performances of revolutionary songs.”

By the early twentieth century, in the United States and Europe, anarchists, socialists, Wobblies, communists, and later Trotskyists all developed their own stock of revolutionary lyrics, though certain standards were common to the international socialist movement as a whole. The latter included such songs as “The Internationale” and “The Red Flag” and were derived primarily from European rather than American sources. Many early radical composers were influenced by Christian socialist thought, so songs of the American Left often contained a distinct religious strain in both text and melody.

Chicago was the publishing center for most revolutionary music prior to 1920. The best-known publications were Socialist Songs with Music (1901) and I.W.W. Songs (1909), better known as “The Little Red Songbook”; both went through numerous editions.

Of all the early American Marxist groups, the Industrial Workers of the World—the Wobblies—are most remembered for their effective use of propaganda music. They wrote almost all their own songs, which were grounded firmly in real labor experiences in contrast to the verse of other radical groups before 1930. The Wobblies took great pride in their singing and sometimes reprinted favorable comment from outsiders in their own publications. One such comment came from journalist Ray Stannard Baker following a 1912 IWW strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts:

The movement in Lawrence was strongly a singing movement. It is the first strike I ever saw which sang! I shall not soon forget the curious lift, the strange sudden fire of the mingled nationalities, at the strike meetings when they broke into the universal language of song. And not only at the meetings did they sing but at the soup houses and in the streets.

Wobbly bards Joe Hill, Ralph Chaplin, and others won international reputations as labor poets for their militant verse. Joe Hill did have the inspiration to use well-known popular tunes of the day, so that his compositions could be picked up and used easily. Yet neither the IWW composers nor any of their contemporaries in other socialist movements thought in terms of emphasizing folk song as a propaganda medium or as an aesthetic base for a new workers’ music culture. The communists would develop these premises, but only much later. Until the 1930s, Marxist theory, communist and noncommunist alike, contained little commentary on traditional song or any other forms of folklore.

EARLY EUROPEAN MARXISM ON FOLKLORE

Little, really, is known of the views of Karl Marx, Georgi Plekhanov, Vladimir Lenin, and their radical contemporaries concerning folklore traditions. What evidence exists must be reconstructed from passing references and anecdotal reminiscences of friends. When tracing one’s academic pedigree to the Marxist classics became fashionable in communist circles, Soviet folklorists could do little more than cite obscure quotes from the works of the pantheon of Marxist heroes. The folklorists V. I. Chicherov and Y. M. Sokolov in the 1930s and Y. M. Sokolov in the 1960s each presented examples of anecdotes indicating that Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Lenin were appreciative of the value of Russian oral tradition.

Reading Chicherov and Sokolov, one learns, for example, that Marx and Engels both were acquainted with German folklore. Marx enjoyed folk songs and, according to Sokolov, is even alleged to have been an able teller of folk tales. Engels, on looking over some editions of folk tales, once wrote, “These folk books, with their ancient speech, with their misprints and poor engravings, possess for me an exceptional poetic charm. They carry me away from our over-tense time, with its contemporary conditions, ‘confusion and delicate interrelationships,’ into another world, which is much closer to nature.” A friend once heard Lenin express

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admiration for Russian oral materials and allude to the value of tales, epics, proverbs, and other popular lore as “important for the study of popular psychology of our days.” But turning such obscure musings into a Marxist theory of folklore requires a leap of imagination.

Marxist literature prior to the Bolshevik Revolution examined folklore and other cultural products from a historic evolutionary perspective with stress on concurrent labor conditions, class structure, and social position. In 1896, Karl Bücher, a German Marxist economist, wrote the tract Arbeit und Rhythmus (work and rhythms), in which he dealt with folk song but hardly exalted it: “While in the first stages of their development labor, music and poetry were usually blended, labor was the predominant element, the others being only of secondary importance.” When anthropologist Paul Lafargue (1842-1911) wrote a study of wedding songs in various cultures, his Marxist orientation led him to underscore the position of women in the family structure of traditional societies.

Marx, in fact, once observed that as an art form, the classic epic was “possible only at a comparatively low stage of artistic development,” reflecting an attitude consistent with the theory of cultural evolution coming into vogue in his day. Marx believed that folklore was aesthetic in its essence and rooted in the primeval world of mankind, and that as society advances, oral traditions like epics, tales, songs, and myths give way to conscious art and mass media. “Is an Achilles possible in the era of gunpowder and lead?” he asked. “Or an Iliad alongside of the printing press?”

One looks in vain for similar or contradictory statements on traditional materials in the writings of other major socialist thinkers before the Bolshevik Revolution, suggesting that prior to 1917, Marxist folkloristics remained grounded in the social Darwinian ethos. Nevertheless, the roots for the idea of using folk songs as propaganda tools can be seen as a logical outgrowth of Marxist insistence that all art was a potential weapon in the class struggle. Plekhanov’s Art and Society, for example, contended that “art for art’s sake” was a hopeless bourgeois illusion. "Pure art has never existed,” he wrote. "He who devotes himself to ‘pure art’ does not thereby become independent of the biological, historical and social conditions that determine his esthetic tastes, he simply shuts his eyes more or less consciously to those conditions.”

“The rightful task of the artist,” Plekhanov asserted, “was to ally himself with the progressive forces of his age.”

Lenin saw things similarly. He rejected abstract expression. “Art belongs to the people,” he said. “It should be understood and loved by [them]. . . [We] must always have before our eyes the workers and the peasants.” But in his writing on art, Lenin never singled out folk tradition for even the most mention.

During the Bolshevik Revolution, folklore was used widely in an agit-prop context. But it was used because of tactical considerations, not ideological dogma. Russia in 1917 was a land in which most people were peasants, steeped in tradition. Rural, agrarian peasant societies still constituted the great majority of the population. Illiteracy was still the rule rather than the exception. Most workers in urban areas were scarcely a generation removed from the farm. When formal education and mass media are lacking people cling naturally to the songs, tales, maxims, and customs of their ancestors. Propaganda couched in the popular vernacular and set in the context of familiar oral traditions is able to circumvent illiteracy in rural areas. Thus, Isaac Deutscher, in his biography of Leon Trotsky, describes a number of tracts written especially for the peasantry by Trotsky. "In these proclamations," Deutscher writes:

"What did the Tsar do? How did he answer the toilers of St. Petersburg?"
"Hearken, hearken peasants, . . ."
"This is the way the Tsar talked with his people, . . ."
"All the troops of Petersbourg were raised to their feet, . . ."
"Thus the Russian Tsar girded himself for the talk with his subjects, . . ."
"Hearken, hearken peasants!"
"Let every word engrave itself on your hearts, . . ."
"All the streets and squares, where the peaceful workers were to march, were occupied by troops."
"Let us through to the Tsar!, the workers begged, . . ."
"And then it happened!"
"The guns went off with a thunder, . . ."
"The snow reddened with workers’ blood, . . ."
"Tell all and sundry in what way the Tsar has dealt with the toilers of St. Petersburg!"

Thus in plain words, without weakening for a moment his grasp on the muzhik’s imagination, [Trotsky] explained the ends his Party was pursuing and the means it would employ; and he translated the alien term “revolution” into the peasants’ idiom: “Peasants, let this fire burst all over Russia at one and the same time, and no force will put it out. Such a nation-wide fire is called revolution.”
Chapter 2

Early Marxism and Folklore

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The cadence and stylized expression of Trotsky’s writings clearly suggests his familiarity with the East European, especially Russian, epic song form. Invoking old tales and historical songs also had a legitimizing value for the Bolsheviks, linking their revolution to the traditions of earlier revolts against czarist tyranny associated with Stenka Razin, Emelyan Pugachov, and the Cossacks. Aleksander Pushkin, Nikolai Gogol, Leo Tolstoy, and other great nineteenth-century Russian writers used folklore in their work, underscoring the spiritual and physical abuses of the old regime. Moreover, many songs, legends, tales, and customs of the Russian people owed their existence to periods when outside powers controlled portions of what became the Soviet state; much of this lore grew out of popular resistance to foreign domination, and using it allowed the Bolsheviks to tap into these nationalistic feelings as they assumed power.

When the Bolsheviks seized national control, they withdrew Russia from World War I and signed a humiliating treaty with Germany at Brest-Litovsk. Foreign enemies encamped on Russian soil during the ensuing civil war, trying to bring down Lenin’s government. Setting new words to old songs of resistance was one method of rallying popular support to the Red banner. One newly revised Siberian partisan song quoted by Sokolov said:

Comrades, forward
The Siberian partisan
Is not afraid of the Japanese cannon,
For the power of the Soviets we will fight
The power of the workers and the peasants.

The Soviet revolutionaries certainly used traditional materials for political ends. But it would be a mistake to think that this resulted from the work of some highly organized central propaganda ministry in Moscow or Petrograd. Sokolov, seeking some evidence that folklore was integral to the Marxist plan, acknowledges that “[t]he song creation of the masses of workmen and peasants at first developed in an altogether spontaneous way” as “the heroic moods at the time of the civil war sought expression for themselves.”

Nor should it be inferred that folklore supplanted other art forms as propaganda tools. Where folklore was serviceable for the Leninist cause, it was used; where it was not, or where other means of communication were more advantageous, it was dispensed with or ignored.

Folklore, indeed, had its drawbacks as a propaganda vehicle, which contributed to the Bolsheviks’ ambivalent attitude toward popular traditions in the early years. Leninist ideology demanded a militant class consciousness, rigid personal discipline of one’s thoughts and actions, and the rejection of sentimental nostalgia about the past in favor of sociopolitical alternatives designed to bolster the modern proletariat. Some peasant lore reflected popular resistance to the oppression of earlier periods and in other instances could be updated. Yet as a whole, Russian folklore exhibited no striking revolutionary zeal. In keeping with oral tradition generally, it in fact was basically conservative and often contradictory in its portrayal of the past. Frequently it served to reinforce old mores, values, and customs that the Bolsheviks were seeking to destroy.

The basic Soviet dilemma in using popular traditions either as propaganda or as the basis of a new proletarian culture is illustrated by the intellectual controversy surrounding the death of Sergei Esenin, the Russian poet. Born of peasant origins and a bohemian by temperament, Esenin was regarded by many as among the most talented literary artists to ally himself with the Bolsheviks. His poems were based principally on firsthand observation and often set in taverns, marketplaces, or other lower-class meeting sites. They portrayed the earthly life, sentimentality, crudeness, and sporadic revelry of those who came there.

In December 1925, Esenin committed suicide. Trotsky, already in the midst of his final power struggle with Stalin, delivered a eulogy that was published in Pravda:

Yessenin’s [Esenin’s] roots are deeply national, and his nationalism, as everything in him, is real and genuine…. The peasant background, purified and refracted through his creative art, is very strong…. But the strength of this peasant background constitutes the real weakness of Yessenin’s [Esenin’s] personality; he was uprooted from the old without striking root in the new.

Esenin, Trotsky noted, “was not aloof from the Revolution. He was simply not akin to it. Yessenin [Esenin] is intimate, tender, lyrical; the Revolution is public, epic and catastrophic. That is why the brief life of the poet ended in tragedy.”

Stalin’s rejoinder came through his then-trusted ally, Nicolai Bukharin, who made clear that the Soviet state saw no tolerable virtue in Esenin’s poetry. The poet, he said, represented the most ideologically backward areas of Russia and its national character, that which was rooted in the decadent spirit of the past. “Is Yessenin [Esenin] talented? Of course he is,” Bukharin conceded. But he went on to make clear that his talent had been a weapon for ill, not good: “Yessenin [Esenin] as a whole is [a] disgusting, vulgarly painted and powdered Russian obscenity.” He followed these strong words by noting that Esenin’s poetry

is saturated with alcoholic tears and therefore still more vile. A monstrous
mixture of “male dogs,” ikons, “glaring candles,” birches, the moon, bitches, gods, necrophilia, a lot of drunken tears, and “tragic,” drunken hiccoughs, religion and hooliganism, “love” for animals and a barbarous attitude toward men and especially women, impotent longings for “wide” open spaces (while sitting within the four narrow walls of a common cabaret), decadence raised to the height of a principle, and so on—all this, under the cloak of a wild “quasi-folk” nationalism constitutes Yessenin.15

The ferocity of this polemic says all there is to say about the skepticism of the regime toward the heritage bequeathed from the “Old Russia” of Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Sergei Esenin (sometimes spelled Yessenin), and the czars. Folk traditions and peasant culture contained much romanticism, barbarism, dissipation, and superstition, which the Soviets saw as their duty to eliminate in order to construct a modern state.

So it is not surprising that as they consolidated national power, the Bolsheviks did not incorporate folklore as a major element of their philosophical and cultural frame of reference. The traditions of the past were useful on occasion, aesthetically pleasing as well. But too infrequently did they transmit the necessary Spartan discipline and correct ideology to suit the Bolsheviks. Fifteen years would pass and profound changes occur on the national and international scenes before the Soviet Union would elevate folklore to the pinnacle of ideological respectability.

**EARLY AMERICAN MARXISM ON FOLKLORE**

In the United States, the writings of Eugene V. Debs, Victor Berger, Daniel DeLeon, Big Bill Haywood, Emma Goldman, and other native radicals devoted little attention to traditional materials and their real or potential function in society. A search of much of the daily press and song literature of the socialists, IWW, early communists, and other splinter groups yields scarcely half a dozen references to folk song and other forms of oral tradition.14 In the anarchist writings, there is nothing. Given the voluminous socialist output, relatively few referenced folk music. A few songbooks linked with the agrarian uprising appeared in the 1890s, and a songbook labeled Socialist Songs with Music was published in about 1901.15

As for the IWW, ironically more of the group’s creations entered folklore tradition than came from it. The IWW left more genuine folklore in its wake than any other labor group in the American history.16 And although the Wobblies disdained armchair theorizing and preferred direct action, from the vortex of the class struggle, they produced their own brand of intellectuals, men rough in manners who toiled with their hands

as much as with their pens but who also read widely and argued violently about literature, philosophy, and art.

“During its heyday, the Wobbly movement was violently distrustful of intellectuals,” said Alan Calmer, writing in *New Masses* in 1934.

But this does not mean that it sneered at all intellectual endeavor. Contrary to most beliefs, the “official” attitude of the I.W.W. toward culture was by no means a negative one. It displayed a high regard for any kind of literary or artistic expression—when such work praised the manual worker, or sniped at anybody hostile to the working-class.17

In fact, in 1915, a pseudonymous “J.E.” published an article in the I.W.W. newspaper *Solidarity* drawing a parallel between the functions of Wobbly songs in contemporary American society and the ballads and broadsides sung by the minstrels to the common people. J.E.’s observations were inspired by a much-discussed literary work, *The Development of the English Novel*, by Wilbur L. Cross, a Yale professor (and later governor of Connecticut).18 Cross argued that the form of the realistic novel grew out of the humorous musical commentaries of British street minstrels, whose broadside songs and ballads poked fun at the intrigues and frailties of the British aristocracy and clergy. The *Solidarity* article suggested that in similar fashion Wobbly songs exposed the pretensions and frauds of capitalist society. “The result,” J.E. said, “may not be a new literary form, but a new class expression within the old forms, and the beginning of the new thoughts and new ideals necessary to the beginning of a new society.”19

Much the same idea was advanced a few years later by the anonymous writer of the notes to a piece of Wobbly sheet music, “The Advancing Proletaire,” published in Chicago:

> Each epoch in the world’s history gives forth its own art expression. We are told that the day of the folk song is past, that in a complex civilization such as we have in America, no true folk song can be produced; that America never has had true folk song of a distinct racial type because of the many nationalities composing our population.

> “As our civilization becomes more complex,” the notes say, “our art must express that complexity.” Such commentary is not indicative of cultural nihilism. The notes continue: “The proletariat working in the modern industries constitutes the majority of the people. Shall not the activities of these groups influence the art of their time as they become more and more conscious of their social status?”20

An important distinction is being made by these two anonymous Wobbly commentators, J.E. and the writer of the notes to “The Advancing
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*Proletaire.* Folk songs, they point out, are rooted in ancient times, when society was rural and relatively noncomplex. The music of the proletariat, on the other hand, is the product of the latest stage of modern urbanization, technological innovation, and social evolution toward socialism. There are no hints of the linkage to come between traditional music and the culture of the proletariat.

But two other IWW references to folk song do make such a link. Soon after J.E.'s article appeared in 1915, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn visited the young Swedish immigrant laborer—turned—Wobbly songwriter Joe Hill in prison and wrote in *Solidarity,* "Joe writes songs that sing, that lilt and laugh and sparkle, that kindle the fires of revolt in the most crushed spirit and quicken the desire for fuller life in the most humble slave. . . . He has crystallized the organization's IWW spirit into imperishable forms, songs of the people—folk songs." Joe Hill immortalized Flynn as the "Rebel Girl" in his song of the same name.

Flynn could hardly have been aware of it, but she had caught a glimpse of the future position of the communist movement, which consciously tied traditional folk songs and propaganda music composed mostly in folk-style into one collective genre, "people's songs," the true music of the working masses.

And in 1918, International Song Publishers, the IWW's Chicago outlet, dropped a similar, if less eloquent, hint of what was to come. The notes accompanying the publication of "The Funeral Song of a Russian Revolutionary" say, "We have chosen as our first offering the translation of a Russian song as a tribute to the nation which has produced some of the most beautiful folk songs of the world, and as a wreath to lay upon the tomb of the thousands of Russians who have died for the cause of freedom."

Taken together, these references to folk song constitute no more in the way of a Marxist theory of folklore than similar passing remarks do in the socialist literature of Europe. On both continents, the tendency was to view folk traditions as interesting and often pleasing outgrowths of early stages in the cultural evolution of humankind.

Folklore and folk songs generally were not a significant part of American intellectual consciousness in the early 1900s. The few interested scholars thought the United States had no folklore of significance. Yet by the time the American communist movement established itself as a going concern in the 1920s, academic studies of indigenous folk traditions had begun to appear at a rapid rate. An American society caught up in the agonizing and uncertain transition from rural to urban culture sought out its roots. Stories of John Henry, Paul Bunyan, and other folk and fake heroes of the people were widely circulated in the mass media.

Henry Ford, whose automobile sales did as much as anything to destroy the rustic past in the United States, garnered much publicity for his hobby of importing old-time fiddlers and folk dancers to Dearborn, Michigan. Carl Sandburg brought out his best-selling folk song collection, *The American Songbag,* in 1927—the same year John Jacob Niles gave the first formal folk song recital to a college audience at Princeton University. It thus is not too surprising that references to folk traditions in American communist literature began to appear more frequently during this period.

The first known comments by native communists on folklore appeared in 1927 in the *Daily Worker* and *New Masses.* Both referred in reviews to Em Jo Bashe's play *Earth,* as a "folk drama." Bashe, a young radical of Russian Jewish parentage, focused on an isolated post—Civil War Negro community in the South, which vacillated between Christianity and voodoo in an unsuccessful attempt to ward off its poverty and misery. Although *Earth* was not truly a traditional play, nor was it performed by a folk group, such fine academic distinctions were never to bother the Left. What was important is that the play bore the label "folk drama" in the communist press and that it provoked speculation on the relationship of folk materials to proletarian culture, precisely the problem that had to be resolved with regard to folk song a few years later.

Harbor Allen, better known for his proletarian plays in the 1930s under the pseudonym Paul Peters, asked the right questions in his review for the *Daily Worker* but gave no answers: "Is this proletarian drama?" he asked. "Is 'Earth' good for workers because it deals with simple people, because it isn't cluttered with intellectual patter, because it goes out in the fields and huts and mountain tops, into a community of people, a mass?" Allen further asks, "Well, what is proletarian drama? Does it include folk drama? Nobody knows. No American has written one."

Ten days after his review, Allen returned to the subject in a *Daily Worker* article entitled "What Is a Proletarian Play?" He groped his way toward a somewhat more positive statement:

When communism has triumphed, will come pedantic plays, like the old miracle plays, narrow, propagandistic. Who is to say they will lack art value? It will be a different sort of value, that's all; a folk art, the art of the ballads, of early paintings, of the songs of the people. And still later there will be a renaissance. A Communist Shakespeare will arise, an individual, yet one of the people . . . that will be Communism's Golden Age.

But still this view was not representative of the attitudes of the movement. Allen's editor felt compelled to include an editorial note disclaiming responsibility for Allen's views. And *New Masses,* another periodical committed to the communist movement, actually panned the play *Earth,*
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editorializing that because it concerned "a mode of life that is alien to us and a problem that does not touch us," it shouldn't have been produced. 27

In this same period, though, the communist press for the first time took notice of several folk song collections. In November 1927, the Daily Worker reviewed George Korson's Songs and Ballads of the Anthracite Miners, suggesting that it illustrated the theory of the materialistic interpretation of history. "All people, without exception, during a certain stage of culture develop sagas and epics, and during another and later stage take to producing ballads," wrote the Worker's reviewer Vern Smith. While his review was mostly favorable, Smith complained that Korson did not sharply distinguish between the "old, true ballad, based on the everyday work...strictly local in tone" and the "more sophisticated successor[s] of the folk ballad, the class war songs now sung by striking workers...universal, and class wide in their appeal" and that too few of the latter kind of song were included in the collection. 28

Writing in the New Masses, Ed Falkowski, a young miner from Pennsylvania, was much more hostile, but not for any political reasons. Falkowski argued that Korson hadn't "been there"—hadn't caught the true feeling of those who had actually worked in the coal pits. His review consisted primarily of an extraordinarily graphic resume of mining life, lyrical and Whitmanesque in its description, which all but stated that its author could better capture the soul of the anthracite miners in prose than Korson could in his book of songs. Falkowski, however, said nothing whatever theoretical about ballads, folk songs, and the class struggle. 29 The Daily Worker also criticized Sandburg's American Songbag in January 1928 and Charles J. Finger's Frontier Ballads in April. Neither review had anything substantive to say about the role of folk music in the communist movement. 30

In sum, the American communist movement in its first decade (1919-1928) established no firm position, favorable or otherwise, on folklore. In this it differed not at all from other radical groups of the time, or earlier. One scarcely would suspect that in less than ten years folk songs and other lore of the people would occupy an exalted position in American communist cultural circles. This startling reversal occurred as a byproduct of ideological and historical circumstances that reshaped the international communist movement but that were rooted even more in the intellectual climate stimulated by the Great Depression in the United States. 31

NOTES


3. The IWW is still active today, centered in Chicago with a few small local chapters. A well-known member is Bruce Phillips, known as U. Utah Phillips, storyteller extraordinaire, who still performs today on the folk club circuit.


7. Sokolov, Russian Folklore, 30-31.

8. Plekhov, Art and Society, 93; italicized in the original.


11. Sokolov, Russian Folklore, 615.

12. Reprinted as "The Death of a Poet" in New Masses (June 1926): 18, 30.


14. I obviously have been unable to read all the early socialist literature, though I have tried to scan the relevant statements on culture of the more prominent leaders of each Marxist group. In part, I have been guided by quotations and leads provided by secondary sources such as Egbert and Person's Socialism and American Life. I have, however, read the IWW and communist press in minute detail. A recent publication covers the topic in detail: Mass Culture in Soviet Russia: Tales, Poems, Songs, Movies, Plays and Folklore, 1917-1953, ed. James von Geldern and Richard Sistes (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

15. A copy of this collection has not been located, but to judge by another publication that reprints part of the contents, socialist lyrics are set to a number of well-known traditional tunes but more often to popular melodies. The few unadulterated "folk songs" included are really "folksy" songs of the "Old Oaken Bucket" and "Suwanee River" variety. See also Leopold Vincent, comp., The Alliance and Labor Songster (1891); Ronald Cohen and Dave Samuelson, Songs for Political Action: Folk Music, Topical Songs and the American Left, 1926-1953 (Puritan Records, BCD 15720-JL, 1996), with a 212-page large-format book of notes; Philip Foner, American Labor Songs of the Nineteenth Century (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1975); Archie Green, Wobblies, Pile Butts, and Other Heroes: Laborlore...
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18. New York, 1899, and in numerous editions thereafter, sixteen of which had appeared by the time of J.E.’s review. The comments in the Solidarity article are based on Cross’s remarks in chapter 1. The terms ballads and broadsides are not actually used by J.E., although the concepts they represent are.

19. J.E., “The English Novel and I.W.W. Songs,” Solidarity (February 13, 1915), 4. Jas. J. Ettor, an important Wobbly organizer, is listed on the paper’s masthead, but there is no direct proof that he wrote this article.


24. Carl Sandburg, The American Songbag (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927). John A. Lomax and others had given recitals of traditional songs to classes and specialized folklore groups prior to this time. Niles’s performance, however, was the prototype for later “folk song revival” concert performances.

25. Harbor Allen, “A Black Folk Drama,” Daily Worker (March 13, 1927), 4. In discussing Earth as folk drama, communist reviewers apparently were following the lead of various literary playwrights of this period who wrote of rural societies and accordingly labeled their efforts “folk drama.” See, for example, the dramatic productions included in Frederick H. Koch, ed., Carolina Folk-Plays (New York: Holt, 1941).


27. Bernard Smith, review of Earth, New Masses (March 1927): 23.

