



## **The Folk: Music, Modernity, and the Political Imagination**

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The monochrome image of African-American musicians adorning the cover of Ross Cole's *The Folk* is somewhat misleading. This is not primarily a book about music itself, and Black America plays a relatively small part in it. The author's stated aim is more philosophical: to explore the development and influence of what he calls the 'folkloric imagination', and thence to assert an ideological connection between the politics of the first English folk song revival and European fascism.

Much of this is highly contestable, but there is also some thought-provoking analysis – for instance, on the congruence between the worldview of *fin-de-siècle* folklorists and that of William Morris and the Romantic movement. Their shared distaste for capitalism, industrialization, urban life, and modernity in general has been noted by others, and is documented thoroughly here – although the author seems unaware that Cecil Sharp attended lectures by Morris in his university days. Another interesting essay transports us across the Atlantic to explore the efforts of 'folkloric thinking' in relation to the songs of African-Americans, and contrasting portrayals of them by white and black folklorists. John Wesley Work, black song collector and member of Fisk University's Jubilee singers, understood that 'negro spirituals' were not outpourings of religious fervour but expressions in a secret language of freedom, while the Jubilee Singers' musical accomplishment and great popularity challenged the perception of black folk song as 'primitive'. There is a telling commentary on the powerful writings of the sociologist and historian W. E. B. Du Bois (who named the spirituals 'sorrow songs') and the novelist Jean Toomer, who viewed the spirituals not merely as historical artefacts but as the foundation for a Black cultural reawakening.

Most of the author's attention, however, is directed towards the English folk song revival. He denies the existence of 'the folk' (a term that, in fact, few of the revivalists actually used), and attempts to demolish the concept of 'folk music'. Statements like '19th century folklorists brought something to life that had never existed before: folk-song', or 'the folk only ever existed in the minds of the bourgeoisie', pepper his opening chapter. This approach is essentially a rehash of Dave Harker's *Fakesong*, on which Cole relies heavily for some of his debating points – in one glaring instance, dutifully copying and pasting Harker's pejorative misquote of a line from Sharp's diary. Georgina Boyes's *Imagined Village* has been drawn upon heavily as well. To their arguments Cole adds a

vener of European philosophy: Heidegger, Zygmunt Bauman, Bruno Latour, Slavoj Žižek, and especially Michel de Certeau, whose critique of the Western tradition of historiography and anthropology proposes that studies of communities by outsiders are inevitably ‘colonialist’ in nature, and thus fatally flawed. According to Cole’s interpretation of his analysis, an imperfect account is seemingly worse than no account at all.

The selectivity of Victorian and Edwardian folk song collectors is highlighted as though it constituted a deception, although they were quite open about it. Sharp wrote that he could have filled his notebooks with music hall, minstrel, and other popular songs, and that it was necessary to ‘work through this stratum’ before striking the real thing. He and his colleagues were seeking a specific class of song, defined by musical characteristics and time period, and made no attempt to pass off their haul as representative of vernacular singing, as Cole suggests. Unfortunately, his attempt to expose their flawed sampling involves some highly questionable analysis. Describing Kate Lee’s meeting in 1898 with Thomas and James ‘Brasser’ Copper in Rottingdean, he stresses the gulf in social status (actually these two literate men, a landlord and a farm bailiff, were no yokels) and asserts that a supposedly ‘uncomfortable’ situation led them to offer an anomalous selection of songs. No supporting evidence – such as a list of the songs sung on the night, compared with the brothers’ typical repertoire – is presented, while a passage from Bob Copper’s *A Song for Every Season*, stressing that the whisky-lubricated proceedings were anything but ‘uncomfortable’, is taken to mean the exact opposite. Such wilful distortion is ironic, coming from an author who complains elsewhere of the ‘erasure’ of the singers’ viewpoint.

This is not the only example of misinterpretation. It is claimed that Sharp, in a contribution to the *Journal of the Folk-Song Society*, utilized a handful of singers from ‘three small districts’ in Somerset ‘as a microcosm of England, and England as a politicized synecdoche for Britain’. In fact, the ‘handful’ of singers turns out to number thirty, and the point of the article is blithely ignored. Co-authors Lucy Broadwood, Frank Kidson, and Fuller Maitland pooled their expertise precisely to demonstrate the ubiquity of Sharp’s Somerset songs across England and Scotland, in published collections, and on broadsides. This goes unmentioned, and the co-authors’ names are airbrushed from the citation. Of course, Sharp and his colleagues got many things wrong, but it is irritating that Cole, while demanding that ‘the conceptual shackles of folk song’ be jettisoned, seems not to have noticed that scholarship has moved on. Field collectors from the 1950s onwards have abjured Sharpian selection filters, while Roud’s *Folk Song in England* (listed in the bibliography but at no point discussed) provides an important corrective to Sharp’s theories through its empirical examination of vernacular song and explanation of its commercial origins.

The most tendentious chapter here is that titled ‘Soul to the Soil’, in which Sharp’s politics are in the gun-sights, and yet more misinterpretations, omissions, and *non sequiturs* are employed. Karpeles’s statement that Sharp ‘did not support’ female suffrage is inflated to ‘staunch’ opposition, her opinion that

his distaste was for the suffragettes' methods rather than the principle is ignored, and a few pages later we are told that he wished to see women relegated to the 'role of maid, wife or servant', regardless of the many respectful and productive professional relationships he formed with well-educated women activists. Even more seriously, an attempt is made to paint Sharp as a proto-fascist, by creating a false paradox between his detestation of capitalism and his rejection of proletarian revolution. The obvious explanation, that any democratic socialist would share this outlook, is barely considered, while a more sinister motive is leapt upon – a desire for 'national socialism'. A couple of passing remarks in *Some Conclusions* regarding analogies between English folk songs and Indo-European folk tales and scales are retro-engineered to support a spurious claim that Sharp 'believed in Aryan supremacy'. Next in the witness box is historian Zeev Sternhell, who proposes that twentieth-century fascism had its origins in an emerging European ideology based on nationalism, authoritarianism, and militarism. In order to hammer Sharp's square peg into this round hole, Cole tries to demonstrate his 'antipathy toward liberal democracy' by misleadingly editing a quote from the Fox Strangways/Karpeles biography regarding minority rights, and ignoring a statement from the same source recording that Sharp insisted his preferred collectivist government 'must be democratic'. And we're told that the folklorists were selective!

Sharp's desire to place folk song and dance on the school curriculum is, outrageously, conflated with the policies of Hitler and Mussolini, as though the songs of 'merriment and jollity' that English children were to learn were somehow comparable with the *Hitlerjugend's* militaristic travesties of folk songs, or Mussolini's mantra of 'holiness and heroism' (Sharp, in fact, was an atheist who despised bellicosity). Sharp was undoubtedly a romantic nationalist, who believed that exposure to folk song might engender a spirit of patriotism, but his proposals were directed in large part against German hegemony over art music – an aspect completely ignored here. This was coupled with a Morris-like desire to improve the lives of ordinary people through aesthetics, and, no doubt, an awareness that placing folk song at the heart of the national conversation would ensure its survival. Politically, Sharp was an avowed Fabian socialist, who sympathized with striking coal miners, supported progressive education and prison reform, and in 1919 was eulogizing the Labour Party manifesto. Nevertheless, he was not, as is asserted here, obsessed with politics. Cole's statement that 'the individual songs and melodies [had] very little importance in comparison with the grand system they seemed to uncover' is quite false – Sharp delighted in the songs themselves above anything – and the claim that his diaries referred frequently to 'arguments about democracy' can be refuted through a brief word search. It is well known that the same diaries contain a handful of racist remarks, but these are unremarkable, even for a leftist, during the period in which they were written – Marx, Engels, the Webbs, and many others have similar skeletons in their cupboards.

In a final chapter, *The Folk* spotlights a white-supremacist American singer-songwriter, Paddy Tarleton, and tries to portray his inept guitar-thrashing and crude, hate-filled lyrics as true descendants of the folk revival. 'Folk music today', we are told, 'has been adopted by a resurgent right-wing nationalism.' But no examples beyond Tarleton are produced, and Cole himself seems irritated that the sympathies of the folk song movement on both sides of the Atlantic remain firmly with the liberal left. Tarleton, moreover, clearly takes his musical inspiration from Irish rebel songs and the American protest oeuvre, neither of which owe anything to the English folk movement, and the suggestion that Cecil Sharp would have 'pricked up his ears' at his rantings is simply a smear. Further, by identifying common ground between Tarleton's beliefs and those of Ewan MacColl and Woody Guthrie, Cole only succeeds in reminding us that folk song can put to radically different purposes, depending on the user. US far-right politics is certainly a terrifying spectre, but the claimed affinity with folk song is beyond far-fetched.

Ross Cole is clearly well-read, articulate (sometimes preciously so), and capable of high sophistry in arguing his case. Sadly, *The Folk*, like *Fakesong* before it, is all too often an exercise in twisting the evidence to suit an agenda, for all its prefixing of glaringly dubious claims with words like 'undeniable' and 'unequivocal'. Its author, surprisingly for an academic researcher in music, has seemingly no aesthetic appreciation of folk song, or any understanding that revivalists might have been motivated primarily by a love of this music for its own sake. *The Folk* is compromised as a work of scholarship by its obvious bias and numerous misrepresentations and errors, and serves only to muddy the waters of an already murky debate.

**Brian Peters**

*Glossop*