

# A Response to “What’s There to Fear from a Crisis Anyway?”

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Stephen Olbrys’s essay is an amazing achievement, and my comments should be read in the light of the fact that I think it is a great work. While reading it, I found myself once again torn between the very issues he raises. Unfortunately, my responses are rather narrow and based almost entirely on my hopes and fears for “the folk,” a term I employ in an autobiographical way, from my background as a working-class Pennsylvania German, for whom “folk” is intuitively defined and is aligned with a “lore” that is traditional, historical, and mostly “old.” I am not a guilty bourgeois nostalgist; folk-lore is important to my identity and I must oppose “progress” and unalterable change before more bourgeoisie become guilty. Since my tendency is toward preservation on a popular level (i.e., with people), my engagement with postmodernism has usually been on the level of “postmodernity,” though in the long run, I think that the two concepts really do coalesce, because the “academic postmodern” is, for me, the same thing as middle-class pretentious “liberalism.” The folk, because of the way power really works, will constantly be defined and undefined by a bourgeois elite (including Charles Keil) regardless of what the folk think and do. We (the folk self-identified) are told that we must accept that “change happens,” while the same people keep controlling the changes.

In the academic/intellectual sphere, folklore seems to hold a powerless position and will constantly have to change with the fashions of the academy to stay vital. What would happen if we just didn’t care? Or what if, like me, one wanted to recover intellectual models that are currently out of fashion—Richard Dorson, Jean-Paul Sartre, Bronislaw Malinowski—or those ignored entirely by academic postmoderns—Wendell Berry, Karl Marx’s actual writings, the voice of the folk? The fact is we talk different games, and, like Wolfgang Mieder, I am not certain that any should be tossed aside, though clearly we cannot deal with all of them. Funny thing, postmodernism doesn’t control or concern any physics departments, even those playing around with some of the most controversial current research. In fact, one only needs to be reminded of the joke played on a theoretical journal a few years ago by a scientist satirizing postmodernist scholarship to understand that

postmodernism is not synonymous with the academy. Perhaps we need to ironize the tricky little ironies presented by postmodernism.

In any case, the call for an open, honest debate of real ideas and problems in folklore to replace the complaining over the job market and the self-serving "savings" of the discipline is extremely welcome. I don't know about anyone else, but I've got bigger fish to fry and whole worlds to "save," starting with resistance to the randomness of the postmodern world so celebrated by bourgeois intellectual anti-humanists. What we really need is to be "anti-progress" so that we can be better "progressives."

After reading over my initial reaction to Stephen Olbrys's excellent essay, I found that my response was perhaps somewhat confused and rambling, but it is included above with few changes, because it offers another possibility in the considerations of folklore theory and practice and folklore's place in the academy. Underlying my comments are several contrasting concepts, such as the marginal and the majority, public folklore and academic folklore, preservation and progress, and static tradition and inevitable change, on which Stephen and I appear to end up on opposing sides. It should be made clear, however, that what we are offering are varying perspectives on these problems, and that, despite the polemical nature of my spontaneous remarks on his piece, I do, indeed, struggle with these positions and do not settle for one side exclusively in any of these polarized issues. Therefore, I hope that the reader will not be put off by the rigid viewpoint of my response but instead take it as a different side in a debate that cannot be solved simply and that must continue. Finally, please note that any bitter tone that may be part of the response arises from my personal preoccupations with class which I think plague many first-generation college students and which often draw me toward the "folk," however variously defined that term may be, and away from the academy.