

The sounds of relevancy are everywhere, and they will be particularly loud at the next AFS meeting in Washington if the recent Middle Atlantic Conference on Folk Culture is any barometer. On May 22 and 23, the Pennsylvania Folklore Society, the Committee on Applied Folklore of the American Folklore Society, and Point Park College co-sponsored the conference. The focus of the meeting was on applied folklore.

The general plan of the conference suggested that there is little opposition to applied folklore. A list of the papers presented (included at the end of this article) infers that the question before the conference participants was not one of whether or not there should be applied folklore, but how should it be applied. Almost all of the papers that dealt directly with the issue took this position. Yet, a charged discussion on the propriety of applied folklore occurred at the third session on Saturday afternoon.

I will avoid discussing in any detail the papers presented at the meeting. Except for the third session, there will be available shortly a transcript of the papers, and the FOLKLORE FORUM hopes that it will be able to publish some of the papers. Instead, I want to spend some time describing that third session.

The central argument in the afternoon seemed to boil down to whether a scholar in folklore should maintain a cool, objective, academic distance from his informants and avoid using any folkloric tenants or theories or other data to alleviate pressing social and political problems, or is applied folklore but an extension of folklore and the scholar has obligation to use his discipline for social ends. The majority of the papers clearly showed what practical applications folklore has, and that it is not impossible to apply folkloric material in solving problems. Earlier in the morning, Bruce Jackson had explained how folklore can be used to break down barriers of social situations; David Hufford mentioned that modern medical therapy can be and has been influenced by folklore; Warren Roberts clearly indicated that architects and builders could learn from folk architecture how to construct more durable and still aesthetically pleasing structures; W. F. H. Nicolaisen stressed the importance of mapping folk cultures to provide guides for field workers and researchers. These were but a few examples of the possibilities in applied folklore, but they were representative of the general trend in the papers. Applying folklore to contemporary life situations is feasible and perhaps desirable.

It was not until the third session that any really serious attack on applied folklore was made. It was good that such an attack was made, if it only stressed the point that not all folklorists are in agreement about applying their findings to real social and political problems. The afternoon discussion was chaired by Richard Bauman, who gave a list of proposals for a center on applied folklore. Unfortunately, his presenting a list seemed to be a little premature, at least in the eyes of some of the conference participants. The other members of the panel, Kenneth Goldstein, Ray Browne, Roger Abrahams, and Richard Dorson, turned to discuss the feasibility of applied folklore itself and never really got to Bauman's proposals. All but Dr. Dorson spoke in favor of applied folklore, but his dissent was spirited enough to provoke an animated debate from the panelists and from the floor.

Dr. Dorson argued that he did not see a tie between folklore as an academic discipline and social reform. Folklorists are not trained to solve social problems, rather they are trained to develop theories about folklore, to investigate findings from the field, and to make available their findings. The role of the scholar must be cool, objective, and unobtrusive. If the scholar wants to get involved in pressing social issues, he should take off the hat of the scholar and put on the hat of the private citizen. In his studies, the folklorist may describe social problems as they are discovered in his investigation, but his job ends there. Reform should be left to those who are specifically trained to do so.

This dichotomy between the individual as scholar and as a social reformer was not accepted by the majority of the participants. Dr. Goldstein argued that folklore is political and is socially oriented and can not be separated from social realities. To not take a position in favor of applied folklore is, in itself, to take a position against affecting any change. Ray Browne insisted that the folklorist as a human must get involved and should bring to bear on social issues all the resources he has, including his knowledge of folklore. Roger Abrahams stated that it is not feasible for the folklorist to separate himself from his humanity. In his own experience, he has found that folklore can be used effectively in increasing understanding among people and thus alleviate some problems arising from ignorance.

The issue of applied folklore had by this time become quite polarized. Statements from the floor further reflected this. Some argued that the folklorist turns to the folk, collects from them, studies them, publishes about them, occasionally makes financial profit from them, secures his own academic position because of them, and gives them in return nothing. The folklorist can too often return from the folk to the security of his private study where he continues to examine with coolness and objectivity what he has found in the field, expressing no compassion or humanity toward the folk by trying to apply what he has found in solving some of their problems. Others argued that if folklorists are not best equipped to apply folklore, who is? Some one who does not know the limitations or strengths of folklore?

The financial importance of applied folklore was an issue that the pro people raised. Most grants coming from the government have a relevancy stipulation. If a scholar can show that his research is relevant to current problems in American society, he is more likely than not in a better position to receive financial aid. Applied folklore, it was argued, does supply the proof of relevancy.

The anti- applied people made some very valid points. Is folkloric theory really something that can be applied to social problems? Isn't the theory itself really only applicable to folklore? Aren't theories and tenets of folklore bases upon which the academic discipline is founded and not bases for social action? How is it that a folklorist suddenly sees himself in the light of being a social reformer? Is the applied folklorist riding a wave of popular emotion? Finally, how can the folklorist see himself in a position of knowing what is better for the folk than the social reformer?

This afternoon session did not solve the problem of applied folklore. The issue often became clouded with emotional pleas for relevancy or broad attacks on the scholarship of those who support applied folklore. Grimaces, laughter, nods of approval or disapproval could constantly be seen among the panelists and the audience. No one seemed to change their position on applied folklore. What was seen at the conference was probably a small reflection of what will be seen in Washington. The AFS had better be ready.

Papers presented at the Middle Atlantic Conference on Folk Culture held May 22-23, 1971 at Pittsburgh, Pa.

David H. Hufford (Memorial University of Newfoundland) -- "Some Approaches to the Application of Folklore Studies."

Bruce Jackson (SUNY at Buffalo) -- "Folklore as a Behavioral Science."

Warren Roberts (Folklore Institute, Indiana University) -- "Function in Folk Architecture."

W. F. H. Nicolaisen (SUNY at Binghamton) -- "The Mapping of Folk Culture as Applied Folklore."

William R. Ferris (Jackson State College) -- "Documentary Film and Applied Folklore."

Henry H. Glassie (Folklore Institute, Indiana University) -- "Folklore and Municipal Zoning."

Roger D. Abrahams (University of Texas at Austin) -- "Folklore and Community Action -- Housing and Educational Systems."

Byrd H. Granger (University of Arizona) -- "Folklore as a Key to Cultural Awareness" and "The Future of Folk Museums in the United States."

Richard Bauman (University of Texas at Austin) -- "Proposal for a Center of Applied Folklore."

S. K. Stevens (Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission) -- "The Bicentennial Plane to Date: An Overview."

Don Yoder (University of Pennsylvania) -- "Preliminary Proposals" for folklore in the bicentennial celebration.

James Deetz (Brown University) -- "The Feasibility of an Urban Open Air Ethnic Museum."

I want to take the liberty of doing a little editorializing on this delicate issue of applied folklore. I think that regardless of any action that the AFS may consider, suggest or act upon, there will be applied folklore. To argue that it is a moot point is unrealistic. Folklore is being applied to the contemporary scene, and there is little to do about it. If AFS should decide to do nothing about it, I would see this as a censure of those in the Society who are very much dedicated to applied folklore, and this would be a mistake. It seems to me that if the tenets of folklore are strong and well founded, there should be no fear that

applied folklore would harm the development of folklore scholarship in this country. Since enough scholars and members of AFS seem to be interested both pro and con in the problem, I would recommend that AFS devote a major portion of its time to discussing it. I would suggest further that AFS seriously consider the proposals to be made to the membership by the Committee on Applied Folklore. The proposals do not destroy any of the foundation of folklore scholarship, rather they open up the field of folklore to perhaps what may be termed a new extension. Funds should be made available for those interested in developing communication among applied folklorists by the AFS, rather than the Society labeling applied folklore as a destructive force. There will be problems. The tax-free status of the AFS could eventually be in trouble if the applied folklore committee begins to engage in political activity. There may be persons who would have ulterior motives for using folklore for their own political ends. But the fact remains, applied folklore is no longer a theory. Those who are interested in it should be given no censure, but encouragement as any one deserves who is widening the scope of folklore study. Applied folklore is possibly one of the best ways to increase folklore's too limited contact with other social sciences. What psychology, sociology and applied linguistics can offer to the folklore scholar has been too little explored. Applied folklore could be a channel for increasing communication, and creating a deeper understanding of the whole milieu in which folklore outside the academy exists.

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