

## FOLKLORE AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Bruce Jackson

I have been curious for some time about the relationship between folklore and the social sciences. It always seemed to me that there was a natural relationship; it is only recently that I've noticed some folklorists trying to establish one. I have wondered what use there might be in such a relationship, what might occur because of it. The few attempts I've seen aren't very good as social science, really. They tend to be folklore books with words from Freud and Durkheim put where the old literary terms were stuck before, which is not incorporating social science perceptions or even applying them -- it's just a new kind of bullshit in a slightly exotic vocabulary.

There is a trap, I think, in trying to apply social science to folklore, for one tries to apply common sense, and common sense does not work very well because things like this rarely are what they at first appear.

If you've ever done any work with jokes, for example, you know this. "Why do you tell a joke?" "I tell a joke because it's funny." Sure. But you probe under the cover of what a joke does for people and you find the most terrible grubs, worms, terrors and nightcrawlers working around in there -- which is why people laugh at jokes.

Whenever you consider the meaning of a social fact, you do well to think of Spencer's analogy of the piece of metal with a bump in it. When you try to hammer the bump down, you get a group of new bumps elsewhere in the piece of metal, and the bump you were hammering at in the first place doesn't even go away. Common sense says, "Well, if I hammer the bump the metal is going to be flat." It doesn't work like that. It doesn't work like that with folklore material and social science either.

I want to mention two nineteenth century intellectual traditions or perceptions that lead into the kind of social science some of us do with folklore. First is the complex and various body of thought usually called Romanticism. The part of Romanticism most important for folklore studies is the one that told us unlettered and primitive and naive people -- women, slaves, idiots and children -- had a great propensity for speaking Truth. Look at a lot of that German writing, look at Thoreau -- if you want to find some sooth, they suggest those four groups as a good place to look and listen. One of the derivatives of this was one could start listening to the stories these people told and pretend there was some kind of truth in there. Perhaps there was; but far more important for us, is the stories themselves got collected and preserved and even published.

The Romantics discovered the peasant and the child, and it wasn't until Freud that we discovered the child has in his head as much a can of worms as his parents do and the peasant is easily as complex a figure as the sophisticate who is collecting information from him.

When you leave for your coffee break, watch two people at the coffee machine and see the choreography. Observe everything that happens when two of your colleagues greet each other out there. I think now of all those tapes in my office of collected folklore. On the boxes it says who sang the songs and where and when, not a great deal more. Those events are not replicable, they are gone forever, and the data I have -- however good the recording, with whatever super microphone I used, however eternal the tape backing -- is forever and outrageously and embarrassingly limited; its utility is pathetically small.

Few of us, I know, are equipped to do much more. The folklorist can, I think, with relative safety stick to motif indices, song lists, themes, and keep himself busy. That is easy and I guess it is understandable. Few botanists feel awkward because they cannot explain why a flower works; as long as they can describe how a flower works they're quite happy.

But that doesn't mean that the whys aren't worth the gamble, or aren't worth the risk or that they shouldn't be asked. An unanswerable question, which some of these appear to be, is of course philosophically meaningless, but we have to be sure we aren't instead dealing with questions that happen to have several answers, which is not the same thing at all. What multiple answers means is there are several questions hidden behind what seems to be something very simple. Only when folklore develops some of the tools of a science can you get beyond the mere collecting and the asking of questions that are only epidermal.

In the process of making taxonomic entries -- those bits of information one hopes will form a descriptive rhetoric or grammar -- one chooses to disregard or discard certain bits of information on the assumption of structural irrelevance. When Darwin did his taxonomies of animals, he did not collect data on where those animals lived, what kind of houses they had, what kind of tree they preferred. When Kinsey did his taxonomies of human sexual behavior, he didn't write anything down about the kinds of rooms those people lived in. Did they do it in the bathroom, kitchen, dining room? Did they use a bed, chair, car? Was the radio or TV or hi-fi on or off and what did it usually play? I cannot think of anyone nowadays who would do that kind of study who could manage to ignore that kind of data.

Science, you see, does not simply consist of ordering information. It consists in a large regard of excluding information. But the set of assumptions you have about what can be excluded controls what you can do with your data forever after, and one of the great problems with folklore studies of years past has been the enormous quantity of data that has been excluded. (For an illustration of what might be included, I recommend Ulf Hannerz' Soulside, published about two years ago by Columbia University Press. Soulside, an anthropological study of a black neighborhood in Washington, D.C., has much of methodological importance to folklorists.)

I don't want to put the taxonomic down completely, because I think it is more than a mere irrational rage for order. Useful knowledge requires ordered information. Knowledge cannot be useful until we have it in a place where we can get at it. But there is a trap of facts, the trap of that old saying, "The facts tell us...the facts tell us..." The facts never tell us anything. The facts are simply there, and all they do is respond to whatever questions we may think up to ask of them.

I have come to think that folklore work independent of cultural referents is ultimately of terribly limited value, for that always says more about the culture of the person doing the analyzing than the culture of the people who happen to have the folklore.

We can discuss internal rhetoric and what appears to be structure, but that appearance is deceptive because one infers narrative elements on the basis of one's own cultural slicings. What seems important is what your culture tells you is important, not what their culture experiences as important. One might work out a perfectly self-validating structural description of a piece of verbal art that has no meaning whatsoever in the culture from which it was drawn and in which it developed. And there is no check against that.

We can talk about why something seems to us pretty -- that is, how it appeals to our esthetic -- or why it's interesting -- that is, how it appeals to our interest. But to do more, we have to relate the thing to the culture that produced it, and not just for what it tells us about the culture, but also for what the culture tells us about it. It is not enough to recognize something as a symbol; we must know also the weight of the symbol, the relative weights of the various symbols, the associative constellations that go with an image. Everything matters, but some things matter a lot more than others -- and where you come from to a large extent determines what is going to matter to you. The problem is transcendence, the goal is objectivity, and I am sometimes worried about the likelihood of ever achieving either.

I remember hearing arguments years ago in graduate school that social arguments are adjunctive to the study of folklore, that folklore has its own norms, its own processes, its own science, its own vocabulary. That's true, all of that is true; one can say that about any field of study. But I wonder how much it matters, really.

I think one of the great things that has happened in a lot of universities in recent years is that a lot of those membranes between departments -- which are academic divisions of labor, not divisions of knowledge having much to do with the way the world works -- are starting to become permeable, or are starting to break down. If we limit what we do with this material to just what our sort of folklore science has so far led us to, we run the risk of a strange copout on the basis of that old academic division of labor. We also run the risk of doing a great deal of very boring work. I think that does very little to help the world, and nowadays when ecology is such an issue one should be very careful when he thinks about putting articles into print; one should consider how many trees it costs to put out an issue of the Journal of American Folklore.

Roger Abrahams, in recent years, has been interested in a kind of double-dramatic analysis of folklore events -- looking at folklore as an event in which he considers not only what goes on in the item, but also what goes on among the people telling it. That is moving in an important and necessary direction.

Any performer, whenever he selects a text, has before him a canon of traditional material. A given teller in a given context will select certain things to display, and these will have certain meanings for him and his audience. How different this is from fiction: a novel -- and this

is where our literary background has, in a way, corrupted us -- sits there waiting for an appropriate reader to come along; a Don Quixote can sit in a library for two hundred years until somebody decides it is a groovy book, and then it becomes a groovy book for the people who have access to that library or new printings. But an item of folklore, if the people around it do not think it is groovy now, disappears; if it does not make sense now it is gone forever. That difference in the mode of existence is painfully important.

Dealing with meaning, with social meaning, is not easy, but if we're going to go on to the next step -- what part of this conference is about is how to use the stuff -- I think we've got to get into that. Most folklorists I know, when someone mentions applied folklore, think either of a folk festival or of letting someone look at their archives. I think there are other things one might do, and I want now to talk about some of them.

I have been thinking lately about the problems of breaking urban image locks. Let me say what that means. If you think about the way police feel about students or longhairs or freaks -- or whatever they're called in your neighborhood -- or the way ghetto blacks regard suburban whites, any of those pairs (because those relationships and those images are always bilateral), you must note that all those relationships are articulated in, ratified by, developed through the kind of stuff we've collected in mountains and in little rural towns for years and years and years. There are jokes and stories, the very words, the terms of opprobrium, the terms of classification, the construction "He is a \_\_\_\_\_."

I am interested in how it is possible to identify these constellations -- these constellations of images and narratives and words -- and how is it possible to break through them. Because until you can break through them, you can't break through any of those social traps that clutter your newspapers every single day.

At this point it is hard for me to talk about this without being personal, because I think a lot of things have happened to so many of us in the past four or five years. For me, it starts very clearly when I was tear-gassed on the Pentagon porch in October 1967, and then there is a whole sequence after that -- clubs and lots of teargas and gunshots and the whole regimen that I know a lot of you have been through also. In the course of some of those events, I found myself on more than one occasion screaming "Pig!" and on more than one occasion other words were screamed back at me with equal passion and conviction.

All the rhetoric and all those words, I decided after a while, are very, very necessary. They are very, very important, for you cannot do the things to people that we do to each other unless you have a way of making a thing of them. A cop is a "pig" only when we have a narrative and rhetorical structure for making a pig of him, otherwise he is a person; a longhair is a freak only when we have a narrative and rhetorical structure for making a freak of him, otherwise he is a person. Let me give you an example of this at work.

In 1966 I worked on a study of narcotics police for the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice. This was a very interesting job, because usually people like me can't get at all close to policemen at work. Once I was in the New York District Attorney's

The second theme, or context, was the development of the taxonomic method, which is the method of Darwin and the method of Kinsey. It works like this: if you collected enough pieces of information, enough samples of a kind of thing, after a while you should come out with a sense of what the context of that kind of thing is like; it aims toward a natural structure. That sort of perception in various ways informs the work of Stith Thompson, of Francis Child, of Albert Lord, of Newman White; it informs the work of all manner of people who collected a lot of things or put them together and tried to shake them out to see what fell out the bottom.

Kinsey said, "The taxonomist is primarily concerned with the measurement of variation in a series of individuals which stand as representatives of the species in which he is interested." I think that describes a lot of folklore work. I shall return to that in a few minutes, because among our great problems are defining species and dealing with categories and the way your perception of categories controls the kind of data you admit, and the kind you can see, and the kind you choose to garbage. Analyses, based on collections like that, are analyses of categories and relationships. But they are not analyses of causes or meanings.

Analysis of stuff collected in a taxonomic way can never be more than descriptive. It is a science concerned with an is and not a why; the middle of it is the kind of dictionary Stith Thompson made, the end of it, the kind of grammar done by Propp and Dundes. The problem is, where do you go from there? Description is the first part of any science, but some sciences stop with description. The kind of physics and chemistry we all had in college is purely descriptive -- it talks about what is, it says if you take some of this and mix it with some of that and you haven't done anything wrong along the way you are going to get this other stuff on the other side. It doesn't tell you why that happens; it doesn't even tell you what happens in the little secret inner parts. It is a description only.

Now social science in a lot of ways isn't even that good -- or that bad. It has developed very recently, and I suppose it has come a long way from Comte's positivism, from Durkheim's broad inferences based on collections of social facts, leaping away from them very quickly to Talcott Parson's structuralism -- a long way in a century or so. But the problem with social science is it has no equations; it has no predictions, only probabilities. There is none of the luxury you have with physical sciences.

There is a middle where things seem absent, where there is no science at play, and if you look at a lot of these things folklorists play with I think you find that folklore -- the material of folklore, not the study -- is the stuff that's in that kind of middle. It is in an area of sociological and psychological concern too broad to be individualized and too narrow to be inserted in a scheme of complete abstraction. At least it works that way when folklore is seen as something having meaning in the life of the person who uses it, as something that works for the user and for the auditor. Few folklore studies really involve all that complexity, however, and there may be good reasons for that: to discuss the socio-dynamics and psychodynamics of what goes on when a folklore event occurs requires a great deal of knowledge about what it means for an event to occur. To completely describe a human interaction is a very difficult task, and very few of us are trained to do it -- very few of us are trained or even know how to watch it.

office, the section that handles dope cases, and one assistant D.A. gave me an envelope of grass and said, "Here, why don't you bring this back and show your students at Harvard. Haha." And I said, "Okay, haha." And then I said, "Hey, can I ask you a question? How is it possible for you to go out all day long and bust people, kick in doors, drag them out of cars, for possession of this stuff, and then you give it to me?" He said, "Bruce, they're not like us."

They're not like us. They're not like us. You look through memoirs about the operation of places like Auschwitz and it is they are not like us. You look through first person interviews in Chicago after the 1968 Democratic convention and it is they are not like us -- for both sides.

What goes into building up that set of categories is what makes it possible for those things we do to occur. I think of many other situations I have observed in which the language and the literature associated with the language have engendered a structure that was socially rough, socially bad. I'll tell you of two others, quickly, and then I'll close.

For awhile I worked with a Buffalo motorcycle gang that was then called the Road Vultures (they're now the eastern branch of the Hell's Angels). One night the club president was shot to death in a rather stupid incident. Two nights later, my wife and I were visiting the clubhouse. This was a Friday night, as I remember, and the funeral was scheduled for the next day. As Friday went on, the clans started to gather, and it was really kind of a spectacular accumulation. The Road Vultures, though, are like Jimmy Breslin's The Gang That Couldn't Shoot Straight: they could never get their motorcycles to run; they had some women in the clubhouse and outsiders complained about the women they had there, but they were women that didn't have anyplace else to go and nobody wanted them anyway. They didn't bother anybody, not usually. But they did look hairy and all that.

My wife and I had been to a party at John Barth's house and we were dressed the way we dressed in those days for such events. When we got to the clubhouse a girl came into the room and said to Willy, the new president, "There are two homicide cops outside and they'd like to talk to you." He said, "Tell them to come in." And she said, "They won't come in, they want you to come out." He said, "Okay." So we went outside and walked across the street toward the railroad yards where the two cops were standing under a tin street lamp. It was like a bad Clifford Odets play, or rather a bad movie of a bad Clifford Odets play. And there were two enormous cops, just standing there. Policemen in Buffalo are enormous. They watched us cross the street: Willy, my wife, me. My wife is not big and I'm not particularly big; Willy is about my height and skinny. Those cops were acting very spooky and weird. I felt weird. I thought, 'These are very bizarre cops indeed.' They did a pro-forma kind of thing: "We'd like some information," to which Willy said, "Up yours," or something equally soothing, and they said, "Okay," and they went away and we went back to the house. My wife said, "You know, those guys were terrified of us." I turned to her and said, "Don't be absurd. How could anybody be terrified of us?"

Then I realized that for me, it was two neutral observers -- Susan and me -- and Willy walking across the street to see these two enormous cops. For the two enormous cops, it was just two of them against one Road Vul-

ture who looked like a Road Vulture should look, another Road Vulture wearing funny clothers (a J. Press Harris tweed jacket and McCreedy & Schreiber boots), and a Road Vulture moll dressed like a regular girl -- which means terrible things surely are afoot. It was clearly impossible for people to talk to one another in a situation like that -- they couldn't even be hostile.

I'll tell you one more. You all know about the current marijuana legislation: you may have heard that marijuana is against the law. Well, while we were doing that Crime Commission job, one of the things we checked out was how grass got to be such a bad thing, for there aren't very many things that get to be that bad a thing: cigarettes never got to be a bad thing, they never sent anybody to jail for cigarettes or booze. We found a group of great atrocity stories. We found that during the 1930's, Harry Anslinger, director of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, and many of his assistants, went on a great anti-marijuana campaign: they gave lectures, wrote newspaper articles, did radio interviews. And they stressed a group of atrocity stories: terrible things that maniacs did to tiny children, violence, sex, all of it. There was one story about a fellow who drove at a couple hundred miles an hour or something like that through the border checkpoint at Tiajuana (if you've ever been to Tiajuana you know there's never enough room there to get a car up to 25 mph). So we amassed all the stories and what it turned out to be was that there were about three basic stories (and they were dubious), and all the others were mere variants of those three stories.

What if there had been a folklorist lurking about the halls of Congress in those days to point out, "Gentlemen, you do not have 200 separate atrocities; you only have three. Two of them probably date back to the Middle Ages, and they're about possession by demons, not grass." A lot of that legislation might never have happened...

Well, I see no way we can negotiate those intercultural barriers such as exist between kids and grownups, students and townspeople, police and poor, poor and police -- any antinomy you care to articulate -- unless we can break through the frozen images each side has of the other.

You know, we pretend in English that we speak the same language, and that is sometimes a fiction. It is a fiction that manages to exist only because the words sound alike -- but it obviously is not true. You are never permitted to consider your enemy a human being, for if you do it is no longer possible for you to go on killing him. One of the things we've been involved in is trying to find ways to make people start defining each other as human beings again. For me, this is applied folklore, for it involves identifying those verbal structures, looking at how they work, and trying to destroy them.

The older I get and the more around I go, the less willing I am to ascribe pure and simple malevolence to anyone. Malevolence is easy in the movies and it is easy when you don't know anybody and when you don't talk to anybody, but it is almost never like that in the real world. There is stupidity sometimes, ignorance a lot of the time, misinformation a great deal. Everyone, in his way, is a prisoner of his own rhetoric and a prisoner of his own image. Plato was very right-on about that when he talked about how the structure of your ideas makes the world in which you can function. No man, in his own scenario, is ever the bad guy.

I've been talking about how we use the stuff of folklore to get people to redefine the scenario, to start a new movie, to identify themselves as actors in the scenario and be able to get out of it. Until we can do that, those actions continue. Until we understand all the folklore stuff, we can never crack those images. It is that simple.