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FOLKLORE

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MARXIST APPROACH

Various methodological approaches to the study of folklore that are based on the writings of Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820–1895). There is no unified Marxist approach in the study of folklore, nor is there any Marxist school allied with the study of folklore. Instead, scholars have incorporated various aspects of Marxist philosophies either in their interpretive methodology or in the selection of the folklore that they study. A great number of the Marxist theories and Marxist-informed studies in folklore are closely related to the interpretation of Marxism in the study of anthropology.

Marxism, which is generally considered to be a critique of capitalism, views capitalism as historically bounded and not a natural, universal system. Marxist theories engage several key concepts important to the study of culture and cultural expressions. Perhaps the most important among these concepts is that of *dialectical historical materialism.* Marxism is based on a dialectical model—one that accepts the often contradictory nature of phenomena. Materialism, usually contrasted with idealism, posits the primacy of matter. Thus, in Marxist dialectical historical materialism, the consciousness of humanity stems from the relationships with material existence. By incorporating the concept of dialectics—a theory of contradiction—with materialism, Marx and Engels provided a basis for the evaluation of history based in materialism. Nature, in this view, is not considered static; furthermore, the often contradictory phenomena of rapid change compared to slow development can be accounted for in this theory. Dialectical historical materialism thus forms the foundation for the critique of the development of capitalism and the concomitant effects of this development on cultural expressions.

Capital, in Marxism, is not a "thing" but rather both a process and a social relationship. Capital is based on the commodity. All commodities have use value and exchange value. The use value of a commodity stems from its ability to satisfy human needs, and the exchange value stems from its fixed-sum distribution. The concept of surplus value, the difference between the worker's wages and the exchange value added to the commodity, allows for the accumulation of capital. *Mode of production* and *social and economic formation* also are essential terms in the Marxist social critique and are used to describe stages in the development of capitalism, a system that suggests both the existence of alienable labor and global exchange networks. The term *mode of production* incorporates both the technical, physical processes of commodity production and the social relationships that underlie production in a society. This level of relationships is referred to as the *infrastructure.* The term *social and economic formation* refers to the interrelatedness of several coexisting modes of production in a given society. This level of relationships is referred to as the *superstructure.* Given this intense focus on processes and relationships, Marxism can be viewed as primarily concerned with the analysis of social relationships and how they are articulated. Thus, in Marxism, there is an intense scrutiny of class, ethnicity, family organization, and the division of labor along gender lines.

Neither Marx nor Engels wrote specifically on folklore or its study, although they were aware of problems associated with the study of folklore. Perhaps the two works that come closest to folklore studies in these original Marxist writings are Marx's *Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx* and Engels' *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State.* The former work engaged the concept of *primitive society* and precapitalist modes of production, and in the latter, Engels provided a critique of the development of the division of labor between men and women in the preindustrial household. The household, for Engels, was the original economic unit of organization, one in which all of the work was done for the benefit of the entire household. Although Marxist anthropologists have been actively engaged in the study of the development of modes of production and social and economic formation throughout history, Marxist folklorists have generally been interested in how these developments are expressed in or articulated as folklore.

One can make several major divisions to describe the practice of Marxist theories in folklore. The first major division is that between Western Marxism and Soviet-bloc Marxism. Although there has been a generally consistent development in Western Marxism and its application to the study of folklore, the development of Soviet folkloristics has been somewhat fragmented. Therefore, it may be useful to view the study of folklore in the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc countries in several periods: immediately following the Russian Revolution, the years under Stalin, and the years after Stalin. Given the breakup of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, there will undoubtedly be a significant change in the study of folklore in the years ahead, particularly in regard to the Marxist analysis of folklore. In recent years, two major trends in the study of folklore have emerged that are closely linked to Marxist-informed approaches. The first of these trends is the documentation and analysis of "workers' folklore." The second of these trends is the increased interest in Third World folklore, particularly expressions associated with colonialism, imperialism and state-sponsored oppression.

Western Marxism is reflected in the works of a number of scholars, most notably those influenced by Antonio Gramsci, Ernst Bloch, Georg Lúkacs, and the Frankfurt school. Primary among those who reflect this influence are Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Walter Benjamin—none of whom lived or worked in Soviet-controlled countries. Thus, these scholars were able to develop Marxist theories that did not necessarily need to reflect the beliefs or views of the Soviet Communist Party. Although they did not engage the study of folklore except in passing, they were generally aware of the potentially subversive orientation of folklore as a collective expression inherently opposed to state capitalism. Although Western Marxism is, at times, evaluated as a reaction to Stalinism—an attempt to rescue Marxian thought from unfortunate associations with Stalinist brutality—it also engages the historical dialectic of post–World War I Europe and the United States, namely, the inability of the workers there to develop a revolution as occurred in Russia. Since the early years of the Institute of Social Research, Western Marxism has become a well-developed approach to cultural criticism, which includes the analysis of folklore at least to some degree. In the United States, José Limón and Jack Zipes are the scholars most engaged in the application of Western Marxist thought to the analysis of folklore. In his analysis of German fairy tales, a study influenced by the writings of Bloch, Zipes relied on Marxist theories to reveal social contradictions in Western culture that, in turn, find expression in the fairy tales. He suggested that "the commodification of Western culture creates a magic spell over society . . . so that, enchanted and blinded by commodity fetishism, we act against our own humane interests." Limón also suggested that the Western Marxist interpretation of folklore is particularly allied with a performance-centered approach to folklore, noting that "in the very aesthetic act of performance may be found an inherent oppositional quality of all folklore. . . . All such performances may be displays of the possibility of hanging on to the *use* and value of things . . . in face of those who would turn all of life into acts of consumption."

The study of folklore in Soviet Russia and other Soviet-bloc countries does not reflect a consistent development. Prior to the Russian Revolution in 1917, the subject and methodologies of folklore were similar to those in the West, with a significant focus on the study of the *byliny* (epic). Immediately following the revolution, there was little focus on the study of folklore. It was not until the 1920s that it was once more engaged, and at that time, there was a flowering of formalist studies, Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* being among the most notable works in folklore from that period. Nevertheless, ideology did not comprise a major aspect of these works. Formalism quickly fell out of favor, however, and, along with Western methodologies such as those of the Finnish School, it was abandoned on ideological grounds. In the late 1920s, Maxim Gorki's formulation of the classical Marxist view that folklore reflected the collective spirit of the working classes and therefore was a valuable achievement gained acceptance and influenced the direction of Soviet folkloristics.

In the 1930s, folklore studies moved toward an examination of both ideology and social problems as expressed by the workers in their songs and stories. The study of individual narrators and the interplay between ideology and individual creativity became a major area of study, as evidenced by B. M. Sokolov's study of *byliny* singers. The prior view of the aristocratic origins of the *byliny* was rejected and replaced by the new interpretation of the genre as a creation of the people. Another area in which Soviet folklorists began to work was the collection and analysis of previously ignored folk genres, such as satires on religious figures and aristocrats, *skazy* (or personal experience narratives), the folklore associated with the revolution, and the folklore of workers. Folklore also was used as a source for and an object of propaganda. Not only was there an interest in the folklore of the workers and the revolutionary spirit expressed in traditional genres, there were also new ideological songs and stories composed in folkloristic style.

With the advent of Stalinism, the study of folklore in the Soviet Union became somewhat constricted, and folklorists were forced to abandon all forms of comparative studies and focus instead on the uniquely Soviet aspects of revolutionary cultural expression. After de-Stalinization in 1956, Soviet folklorists were once again allowed to make reference to Western works in their scholarship. Also, folklorists attacked the manifestly nonfolkloric forms of *byliny* that detailed the exploits of heroes of the revolution and Soviet leaders. Soviet folklorists also began to study the folklore of ethnic minorities living in the Soviet Union. The ideological slant of these studies was closely linked to the dialectical historical materialism of classical Marxism. By studying the folklore of the minority populations, their cultural expressions could be included by folklorists in the analysis of the historical development of societies. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, it is unclear what the future holds for Marxist approaches to both the analysis and collection of folklore in these previously Marxist-informed societies.

The study of workers' folklore also has become a significant object of study outside of Soviet-influenced countries. In Scandinavia, numerous scholars have been involved in both the collection and analysis of workers' lore, and throughout the 1980s, several conferences were held specifically concerned with workers' culture inside and outside of Scandinavia. In the United States, the study of workers' folklore is often considered under the rubric of "occupational folklore." Studying the folklore of workers contrasts with the romantic project of studying the folklore of peasants, dominant in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century folklore studies.

The fastest-growing field of study in Marxist folkloristics involves the Third World countries and their development. The transition from precapitalist to capitalist modes of production is a significant historical change. Michael Taussig, in his study of Latin American plantation and mining communities, examined how precapitalist symbols, particularly the devil, are used to negotiate the fearful transition to capitalism. In his study, he linked the devil as manifest in the folklore of the workers to commodity fetishism. According to Marxist theory, abstractions and social relations tend to become regarded as things—they are objectified. In the extreme case, the objectified becomes reified and appears to take on its own agency—it becomes fetishized. In the Marxist critique of capitalism, commodities are seen as becoming fetishized, and this fetishism, in turn, finds expression in folklore, according to Taussig. Precapitalist symbols, such as the devil, are then used to express phenomena of the emergent capitalism. Studies based on Taussig's evaluation of the use of precapitalist symbols to explain emergent capitalist phenomena could include the examination of economic exchange in peasant societies as expressed in their oral narratives.

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See also Cultural Studies; Historical Analysis.

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MASK

Any sort of facial transformation or adornment and the costume and behavior that necessarily accompany it. In this sense, masks can range from the application of makeup to the use of elaborate head coverings. As the basic sites of communicative expression and identity, the head and face are subject to extremely diverse forms of masking in cultures throughout the world. Masks and masking techniques can be viewed as arts and crafts, but their cultural function of altering the faces of individuals in everyday life, drama, ritual, and celebration also must be considered. The concept of "face" implies more than anatomical features. It includes all of the social and symbolic meanings members of a society associate with specific physical appearances. The considerable social significance of the face accounts for stereotyping based on facial features, such as eye shape, nose size, and skin color, and for the human propensity to distort these features through masking. By simultaneously releasing individuals from their accustomed face and burdening them with expectations associated with another, masking reveals individual and cultural explorations of personality.

The production of masks consists of several stages: collection of raw materials, preparation of the materials, crafting the mask from them, and application of the mask. Materials for mask making include wood, shells, grasses, feathers and other natural products, papier-mâché, ceramic, treated animal skins, plastic, rubber, and metal. The raw materials may be carved, shaped, combined, painted, or otherwise manipulated. In some contexts, any member of the given society may perform each of these preparatory tasks; in others, the tasks may be restricted to professionals and those in other specialized roles. For example, although many participants in European carnivals purchase their masks from professional craftspeople who use materials procured commercially, their New World counterparts more readily construct their own, original masks from materials at hand. Application and use of certain masks may likewise be restricted to specific individuals, groups, or occasions, such as shamans in some rituals. Some masks may be reserved for use by one gender.

The functions, meanings, and significations of masks must be determined in relation to the specific cultures and events of which they are a part. A surgical mask means something very different in an operating room than on the street at Halloween. Many Native American masks have religious significance restricted to specific rituals and dances, including healing and puberty ceremonies. Some masks have the power to transform the person wearing them into the figures they represent.

Traditional occasions for masking generally cluster at points of transition in the annual cycle and the life cycle, such as changes in seasons, birth, and death. Most European scholars formerly took this as an indication that all masking events originated in a primitive, pre-Christian mentality geared toward spirits of nature that govern fertility and renewal or spirits of the dead that can affect the living. From a different perspective, transitional points can be seen as pauses in the productive cycles. The increased leisure time during these phases allows for eased structures of social engagement. In this context, masking occasions, like other forms of play and fantasy, provide a possibility for the exploration of alternative identities. This exploratory operation often focuses on inversions, opposites, and exaggerations. Some of the most common masking strategies involve the conflation of incompatible binaries: male/female in cross-dressing and androgynous masks; human/beast in the many animal masks found globally, in wild man figures, and in the Kwakiutl man within a raven within a bull; plant/animal in vegetation demons made of agricultural waste or excessive local natural products, such as bog moss creatures; insider/outsider in the frequent stereotyped depiction of ethnic groups, such as Jews, Gypsies, and Moors i