The Devolutionary Premise: A Definitional Delusion?

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Alan Dundes first presented "The Devolutionary Premise in Folklore Theory" at the American Folklore Society Meetings at Toronto in 1967. Following his presentation a rather animated debate took place as to whether folklore was actually devolving. Such notables as Alan Lomax testified for the reality of devolution and bemoaned the extinction of folksongs, while Dundes simply accused Lomax of being immersed in the devolutionary *Weltanshauung* that had just been delineated in his paper. Lomax and others might quickly recognize their bias, Dundes asserted, if they would only "look at the jokes" and observe their popularity, vitality and the aesthetics of their performance. Yet no examination or criticism of the devolutionary premise itself ever took place; the evidence for its existence and the methodology of its discovery remained unchallenged, even after the appearance of the argument in the *Journal of the Folklore Institute* in 1969.

Dundes' argument revolves around the notion that folklore theories are inherently biased against progress,[1] and Dundes proceeds to uncover the taints and tinges of this bias in the theories of Max Müller, Hans Naumann, Walter Anderson, Gyula Ortutay, Gordon Gerould, Edward B. Taylor, Richard Dorson, Sigmund Freud, Rudolf Steiner and Carl Gustav Jung. Dundes concludes by suggesting "alternative *a priori* premises so that modern folklorists might be enabled to escape the vise of devolutionary thought." After all, one could just as easily assume a "model in which folklore actually improved or rather evolved in time."[2]

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1. Alan Dundes, "The Devolutionary Premise in Folklore Theory," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 6 (1959):5.
2. Dundes, 18–19.

Though several years late, an effort to scrutinize that thesis which categorizes such a diversity of folklore theorists as devolutionary should be attempted. We are not concerned here with whether folklore is indeed devolving, but whether the devolutionary premise is as fundamental to folklore theory as Dundes asserts. We must evaluate the data that Dundes selects, analyze the criteria for progress he employs, and lay bare the underlying definitions in an effort to understand why Dundes may see devolution where we may not. At times it may seem as though the operation we are about to perform is more destructive than those elements of disease it is designed to excise, nevertheless we proceed with the conviction that the operative procedure will at least prove instructive to the new surgical intern—and the patient be damned.

Let us begin with a consideration of the theories of Edward Burnett Tylor. Not only was he the leading theorist of the influential survivalist school of folklore, but the champion of cultural evolution, who nevertheless, in Dundes' view, "forcefully argued the *devolution* of folklore."[3] Tylor is a devolutionist, according to Dundes, because he regarded folklore (i.e., survivals[4]) as the *mutilated* fragments of culture," culture that has devolved, degenerated and decayed.[5] Examination of Tylor's doctrine of survivals reveals that such an interpretation is simplistic. Survivals according to Tylor are those "processes, customs, opinions, and so forth which have been carried on by force of habit into a new state of society different from that in which they had their original home, and they thus remain as proofs and examples of an older condition of culture out of which a newer has been evolved."[6] By definition these elements of culture have not evolved or decayed, but have merely survived. Furthermore, the doctrine of survivals is a three-fold doctrine: there are three distinct types of survival, and each type appears capable of evolution!

There are what might be called primary survivals. These are

3. Dundes, 12.
4. There is evidence that folklore and survivals were not coterminous categories for Tylor. Survivals seemed to be a greater class than folklore, which referred chiefly to peasant superstition. The equation of folklore and survivals seems to have been established by Taylor's followers: Gomme, Frazer et al. Note Tylor's use of the term "folklore" in his *Primitive Culture* [= *The Origins of Culture*] (New York, 1958) 1: 72, 86, 116, 136, 142, 145.
5. Dundes, 12.
6. Taylor, 16.

basic mental processes which arose in the early stages of human development, such as the association of ideas or the doctrine of analogy, and persist in more advanced stages of civilization. In savage culture, these processes are responsible for the belief in magic, the philosophy of Animism, and the formation of myth.[7] But these same thought processes, consciously employed, are the foundation of our own poetic imagination:

> Poetry has so far kept alive in our minds the old animative theory of nature . . . it [is] at once a consequence and a record of a past intellectual life. . . . The rude man's imaginations may be narrow, crude, and repulsive, while the poet's more conscious fictions may be highly wrought into shapes of fresh artistic beauty, but both share in that sense of the reality of ideas, which fortunately or unfortunately modern education has proved so powerful to destroy.[8]

The primitive mental processes underlying myth underlie poetry, the distinction between the two resting upon the degree of reality accorded the doctrine of analogy.[9] Thus for Tylor, there is the possibility of evolution from the mythopoeic to the poetic.

Secondary survivals are those fragments of savage philosophy which persist into civilization. "Thus the German peasant, during his child's birth and baptism, objects to lend anything out of his house, lest witchcraft would be worked through it on the yet unconsecrated baby."[10] Secondary survivals involve an old form with its associated meaning, though it is only a fragment of a formerly pervasive religio-philosophic doctrine. Such survivals are also capable of evolution, as they may regain their former importance and systemic meanings, and this Tylor refers to as *revival.* Tylor's interpretation of medieval witchcraft and modern spiritualism is that of "revival from the regions of savage philosophy and peasant folklore . . . A great philosophic–religious doctrine, flourishing in the lower culture but dwindling in the higher has re–established itself with full vigor."[11] (Since Dundes regards survivals, which have lost

7. Tylor, 116, 285, 296, 297.
8. Tylor, 292, 301, 315.
9. Myth itself may evolve artistically: "The development of Myth forms a consistent part of the development of Culture. . . . Savage mythology may be taken as a basis, and then the myths of more civilized races may be displayed as compositions sprung from like origin *though more advanced in art.*" [italics mine] Tylor, 284.
10. Tylor, 116.
11. Tylor, 138, 141–142.

their meaning and importance, as devolutionary, he should regard revivals, where their meaning and importance is regained, as evolutionary. Tylor, however, regards all revivals as devolutionary.[12] We may conclude that these two gentlemen employ very different stands and methods in discerning evolutionary and devolutionary tendencies.)

Tertiary survivals involve the persistence of an old form without its associated meaning. Sneezing formulas, drinking healths, and the taboo against saving a drowning man seem arbitrary and meaningless until the folklorist re–establishes their connection with some primitive theological principle. Yet this type of survival is also capable of evolution into what Tylor calls the *partial survival,* "the mass of cases where enough of the old habit is kept up for its origin to be recognizable, though in taking a new form it has so adapted to new circumstances as still to hold its place on its own merits."[13]

This analysis of the doctrine of survivals is intended to demonstrate that there is sufficient evidence in Tylor's theory for an evolutionary perspective regarding folklore. Basically what Tylor meant by survival was something that is recognized as having survived from the past, and while Tylor focuses upon the past of these survivals rather than upon their future, there is ample indication that they may evolve aesthetically, semantically, and philosophically. Therefore, it is not surprising that Dundes notes Sidney Hartland applying evolutionary schema to the study of the folktale,[14] since the evolutionary capabilities of folklore have been strongly implied in the master's theory.

A number of paradoxes in Dundes' thesis suggest that a multiplicity of criteria are being employed in his identification of the devolutionary premise. Hans Naumann's theory of *gesunkenes Kulturgut* is devolutionary because it states that folklore moves from higher to lower social strata, and Walter Anderson extended this idea in his belief that folktales move from "culturally higher" to "culturally lower" peoples.[15] Yet Tylor and his followers likewise are devolutionists because they regard folklore as a carry–over of traits from lower levels of culture to higher ones. Dundes, with equal facility, relates the devolutionary premise to the popular

12. Tylor, 139, 156.
13. Tylor, 72.
14. Dundes, 11.
15. Dundes, 6.

usage of the term folklore as "untruth"[16] and at the same time to the depth psychologists and anthroposophists who regard folklore as a source of "spiritual truth."[17]

Dundes employs aesthetic criteria in illustrating the devolutionary premise in the historic–geographic theory (e.g., the Ur-form is the most noble, complete, and logical form of the tale which degenerates through time); functional criteria in his consideration of the depth psychologists (e.g., the symbols of myth and tale of the past contain useful spiritual truths lost to our civilized society); sociological criteria in dealing with Hans Naumann and Walter Anderson (e.g., folklore moves from a higher to a lower social group); systemic and semantic criteria in analyzing Tylor (e.g., folklore is a fragment of an old philosophical system which has lost its meaning and importance); and vitalistic criteria in his application of the premise to Gordon Gerould (e.g., folksong is dying). It becomes fairly obvious that given a sufficient number of criteria (and assuming that one is clever enough), one should be able to spot a devolutionary or evolutionary premise lurking in any theory. For instance, although transmission scholars tend to be heartily devolutionary with respect to the aesthetic aspects of folktale and ballad, they must be regarded as evolutionary with regard to their popularity and vitality, since one little Ur–form gives rise to myriads of variants.[18]

Not only must we make our criteria explicit in our devolutionary discussion, but we must isolate our *units of evolution*; that is, we must specify what it is that is doing the evolving or devolving. For example, Dundes regards Max Müller's theory of myth as devolutionary because it is associated with a theory on the "disease of language." For Müller, however, *myth* is not the mere semantic degeneration of metaphor, but a narrative that has semantically "evolved" upon the base of forgotten metaphor:

> These expressions remained long after their meanings had ceased to be understood; and as the human mind is generally as anxious for a reason as ready to invent one, a story *arose* by common consent, and without any personal effort. . . . [italics mine][19]

16. Dundes, 14.
17. Dundes, 16–17.
18. The popularity and vitality of jokes and folkspeech is pointed out by Dundes to suggest the non-devolutionary character of folklore: Dundes, 15.
19. Richard M. Dorson, ed., *Peasant Customs and Savage Myths* (Chicago, 1968) 1: 86.

To simply categorize Müller's theory of myth as "devolutionary,"[20] is to belie the status of devolution in his theory. It is metaphor that has semantically devolved, not myth or folklore. Similarly, for Tylor, it is not folklore that is devolving semantically and systemically but primitive philosophy. We should distinguish between the devolution of folklore, and folklore as the *result* of the devolution of something else. In essence, what is suggested here is the possibility that the multiplicity of criteria for progress, and the shifting nature of the unit of evolution, allow for a concept of devolution that is so vague and imprecise that the substantiveness of the proposition of a devolutionary premise in folklore theory becomes questionable.

We must finally consider the implications of the various definitions of folklore in establishing the existence of the devolutionary premise. Dundes is well aware that certain devolutionary theories based upon vitalistic criteria are linked to specific definitions of the concept of the folk:

> Of course, the gloomy reports of the death of folklore are in part a result of the misguided and narrow concept of the folk as the illiterate in a literate society, that is, the folk as peasant, as *vulgus in populo,* as isolated rural community. Since the majority of folklorists in Europe and Asia continue to restrict the concept of the folk in this way . . . it is easy for them to believe that gradually the folk are dying out. With the devolutionary demise of folk or peasant culture, the deterioration of folklore was a matter of course.[21]

One may deduce from this observation by Dundes that given certain definitions of folklore, devolution ceases to be a theoretical bias but is rather an observable fact! Dundes criticizes not the devolution of the folk but the definition of the folk. Dundes sees a devolutionary bias in so much of folklore theory because he is working with a different definition of folklore than those theorists he analyzes. Not only does Dundes subscribe to a different concept of *folk*[22] but to a different concept of *lore* as well.

For Dundes, lore implies an enumeration of genres: myth, tale, proverb, dance, recipe, costume, instrumental music, fence types,

20. Dundes, 6.
21. Dundes, 13.
22. Dundes, 13, n., 34.

and conventional sounds used to summon animals.[23] (The unifying principle underlying these genres eludes me, and I would be interested to know how Dundes recognizes a new genre of folklore when he sees one.) But Dundes is wrong in assuming that W. J. Thoms similarly offers an enumerative definition of folk–lore, though he does enumerate several genres. For Thoms, the term "lore" implies a teaching, a doctrine, a religious or moral philosophy from olden times, and he thus urges that English folklorists amass these bits of lore in an effort to do for Britain what Jacob Grimm did for Germany—viz., reconstruct the system of mythology and religion of the heathen folks before the arrival of Christianity.[24] Lore, for Thoms, is not the enumeration of idle verbal and behavioral genres, but the remnants of primeval philosophies.

This concept of lore permeated English folkloristics for over a century. When Sir James George Frazer studied myth, legend and folktale, he was studying the intellection and imagination of the past, not the oral literature of the present:

> Myth has its source in reason, legend in memory, and folk-tale in imagination; and that the three riper products of the human mind which correspond to these its [sic?] crude creations are science, history and romance.[25]

Similarly Tylor uses folklore for his documentation of the history of the human intellect; *Primitive Culture* is in no sense a work devoted to the study of culture in all its aspects.

> In the various branches of the problem which will henceforth occupy our attention, [is] that of determining the relation of the mental condition of savages to that of civilized men. . . . The study of savage and civilized life alike avail us to trace in the early history of the human intellect, not gifts of transcendental wisdom, but rude shrewd sense taking up the facts of common life and shaping from them the schemes of primitive philosophy.[26]

The notion that folklore embodies fragments of ancient philoso-

23. Alan Dundes, introduction, *The Study of Folklore* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1965), 3; *Oxford English Dictionary* s.v., "Lore" (Oxford, 1961); Jacob Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, trans. James Steven Stallybrass (New York, 1966), 1–12.
24. William Thoms, "Folklore" in Dundes, *The Study of Folklore*, 4, 5.
25. Apollodorus, *The Library*, trans., Sir James George Frazer (New York, 1921) 1: xxxi.
26. Tylor, 68.

phies which have disappeared with the growth of scientific rationalism is a problem of definition, not of devolution. The study of folklore for the survivalists *was* the study of the remnants of prehistoric philosophy in civilization. The popularity and vitality of jokes in American culture today offers no evidence of a survivalist devolutionary bias. Jokes were known in the nineteenth century, they simply weren't considered folklore. To impute a devolutionary premise to survivalist theory is to criticize antiquarians for studying antiques, or to suggest that antiques may be very new rather than very old.

Narrow definitions of folklore coupled with a multiplicity of criteria for progress may always be employed to foster the illusion of a devolutionary premise. For example, those who define folklore in terms of oral or unwritten tradition restrict *a priori* the evolutionary possibility of folklore, for the recognition of a tradition presupposes a minimum rather than a maximum of change through time. If the evolution of an item or genre of folklore is too marked, too radical, its traditionality may not be recognized; its text, tune, structure or performance will no longer be regarded as being "within the tradition." Should this newly evolved form gain popularity, we are confronted with the paradox that by evolving the lore has killed itself and so devolved. Thus one might speak of the devolution in the United States of such folktales as *A-T type 175, The Tar Baby and the Rabbit,* despite the widespread popularity of literary and cinematic adaptations.[27]

In this essay we have not tried to deny the existence of what might be called devolutionary tendencies in certain folklore theories (e.g., certain transmission scholars regard folk narratives as devolving aesthetically), but to challenge the reality of *a* devolutionary premise in folklore, some unconscious sado–masochistic compulsion of folklorists to devolve the lore that they love. We suggest, rather, that evolutionary possibilities are explicit in the theoretical literature and that the belief in the existence of a devolutionary premise is a function of current definitional and procedural biases rather than past theoretical ones. But should folklorists re-

27. This paradox is more apparent than real, however. The extinction of species is a concept inherent in any general evolutionary theory, and is not at all a symptom of devolution. Nevertheless, Dundes persists in linking death with devolution throughout his essay, and equates the study of dead or dying things with the devolutionary perspective. This, of course, relegates all paleontologists, and archeologists to a devolutionary heresy, which I sincerely doubt they would acknowledge.

gard this paper as an exercise in semantic contortions and remain faithful to the position that we do have a devolutionary *Weltanschauung,* let us remember that our physicists inform us that all systems, including our universe, have an irreversible tendency toward increasing disorder, so we are, at least, in good company.[28]

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