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# The Third Force in American Folklore: Folk Narratives and Social Structures

> In most other sciences the ancient boundary stones have been shifted from time to time, to enclose fresh territory, and it is for us to see whether our own stones are of necessity and properly landfast.
>
> *A. R. Wright*

A. R. Wright in a 1927 article in *Folk-Lore*[1] argued that folklore as a discipline needed to move from its traditional concerns with survivals to include a consideration of contemporary folklore. In the more than sixty years since the article was published Wright's substantive point has become uncontroversial. However, Wright's broader theoretical point needs to be underlined. The regular redifinition of a discipline is a useful tonic. Like revolutions in the political arena, changes in scientific paradigms can play an important role in rejuvenating disciplines.

American academic folklore survives in perilous times. American folklore–as a theoretical approach–has lost its momentum. Related fields, such as anthropology, social history, and literary criticism seem to be thriving. It is increasingly worrisome that folklore as an intellectual, rather than a descriptive or applied, approach seems lacking in direction.

Surely it is an act of hubris to assert that a discipline has lost its way. No precise and objective measures can test such a proposition, and many have a vested interest in denying the assertion. Critics can point to examples of rich and significant research. In fact, the problem is not that there is an absence of good research, but that it is done without clear direction. It lacks a self-conscious meta-theoretical base. The approaches in folklore lack labels, and hence lack a consensual identity. I shall suggest a way in which we might conceptualize a stream of current work, and perhaps recapture some of the excitement of being a "community" of scholars working on common (if broadly defined) problems.

American folklore has not always lacked focus. In the early 1970s, the discipline flourished. "Performance theory" dominated talk at collegial gatherings, and the *Journal of American Folklore* devoted a special issue in 1972 to the new perspective.[2] Folklorists borrowed ideas from related disciplines, but returned ideas to them as well. The folklorists associated with that approach are a distinguished

[1] Wright, A. R.: The Folklore of Past and Present. In: Folk-Lore 38 (1927) 13–39, here 15.
[2] Bauman, R./Paredes, A. (edd.): Toward New Perspectives in Folklore. Austin 1972.

group: Robert Georges, Barre Toelken, Roger Abrahams, Richard Bauman, Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, and Dell Hymes. Others such as Alan Dundes and Henry Glassie, while not performance theorists in the strict sense, dealt with issues on the periphery.

This distinctively named approach energized the doing of folklore. From the somewhat "antiquarian" interest in the text itself (even contemporary texts), the focus changed to the interactive process by which folklore is communicated. The shift was from an essentially literary and static approach to a dynamic view that was grounded in sociolinguistics, social psychology, and dramaturgical theory. Like most intellectual perspectives, performance theory had its period of fashion and ferment, advanced the field, and is now taken for granted by most folklorists.

The problem for folklore is that no recognized and labelled theory arose to spark folklore after performance theory had run its course. In part this is a function of the small size of the discipline. Unlike larger fields, folklore does not have large generations of new scholars each year to sharpen the cutting edge and dispute accepted wisdom. The number of new Ph. D. who receive teaching positions at major research institutions in America is small indeed. Folklorists must combat the tendency for the field to stagnate in old, overworked theories.

Further, the changes that have occurred have not been recognized. I contend that during the past fifteen years an approach to folklore and folk narrative has developed, even though it hasn't been widely recognized by practitioners as a distinctive perspective. As a consequence, I do not present a radically new vision, but only underline some recent trends that I have discerned.

I term this approach *The Third Force in Folklore*. By this title I differentiate it from both the textual, content-oriented approach and the interactional, performance approach. Specifically this approach emphasizes the socially situated character of tradition–interpreting folklore in light of issues such as class, gender, nationalism, community, institutions, and economy. The textual approach and performance theory have tended to downplay the larger contexts in which tradition occurs in favor of an emphasis on microcontexts. Understandig the larger, more "macro" issues provides a broader understanding of what tradition can mean to a social order[3], while not ignoring the context, content, or texture of folklore.

These concerns are certainly not new; European folklorists need not be reminded of this fact. A related model of folkloristic scholarship is traceable to the writings of European ethnologists, such as Sigurd Erixon. As Erixon notes in distinguishing ethnology from sociology:

> "Like sociology, ethnology is a community science but in contrast to the former ethnology does not content itself [. . .] with studying community conditions from a formal point of view or for their own sake, but will, as Max Weber lays down

[3] Fine, G. A.: The Process of Tradition: Cultural Models of Change and Content. In: Comparative Social Research. ed. C. J. Calhoun. Greenwich, in press.

in his direction for sociology itself also, 'seek to interpret and understand the community behaviour of human beings.'"[4]

Erixon believed that we should examine society in terms of social differentiation and change,[5] and this structural categorization contributes to our placement of expressive culture in light of its position within a materialist base. Erixon's approach represented an important strand of folkloristic understanding in Europe, but had a relatively minor impact on American folklore. The tradition entered folklore dialogue in the United States only with the publication of Linda Dégh's *Folktales and Society*.[6] Dégh, trained in the European ethnological tradition, brought social contextualism, community science, and European ethnography to an American audience. The social structural elements of how the community influences the narrator and how the narration is set within community events was a central emphasis of Dégh's examination of story-telling in an Hungarian village. Although she does not emphasize the larger issues that motivate the analysis, her concern is the meshing of the material and expressive grounding of the community life. While not every researcher who writes in this tradition is directly indebted to Dégh's writings, the approach in America can be traced to this work, read by many American graduate students in folklore.

Fundamentally this approach melds the material and expressive bases of society. Within this are two subsidiary goals: 1) to demonstrate how expressive aspects are situated and directed by the material bases of society, and 2) to demonstrate how the material bases of society are a function of the expressive images held by members. Some researchers emphasize the first (e. g. Marxists), whereas others (e. g. Structuralists) emphasize the second. Each of these themes is fundamentally sociological. Indeed, as Thompson[7] noted, given this natural affinity it is surprising that folklore and sociology have not drawn upon each other more often[8].

## *Domain Issues*

What does the Third Force in Folklore cover? To specify the dimensions of this approach I propose a set of five assertions of how cultural traditions might properly be understood. I do not claim that these assertions d e s c r i b e the approach, but they do underline some of its most prominent features:

4 Erixon, S.: Regional European Ethnology: I. Main Principles and Aims With Special Reference to Nordic Ethnology. In: Folk-Liv 1 (1938) 95.
5 id.: Regional European Ethnology: II. Functional Analysis–Time Studies. In: Folk-Liv 2 (1938) 263–294, here 263; see also Marinus, A.: Folklore et Sociologie. In: Bulletin de la Société Royale Belge d'Anthropologie et de Préhistoire 74 (1964) 87–109.
6 Dégh, L.: Folktales and Society: Storytelling in an Hungarian Peasant Community. Bloomington 1969.
7 Thompson, K.: Folklore and Sociology. In: Sociological Review 28 (1980) 249–275.
8 See Odum, H.W.: Folk Sociology as a Subject Field for the Historical Study of Total Human Society and the Empirical Study of Group Behavior. In: Social Forces 31 (1953) 193–223.

1) The content of cultural traditions are shaped by the social structural conditions of the community in which they are communicated. These conditions are expressed in the relationships among groups of segmental importance (e. g., class, party, occupation, race, age, and gender).

2) The content of cultural traditions affects the social structural conditions of society by influencing the world-view of individuals (and, hence, groups) and this alters their behavior. Tradition has an obdurate character that determines what actions are deemed possible.

3) Folklore traditions, like social organization, are always in dynamic tension and change. The forces that induce this change are both structural and cultural. Folk narrative may either support the change or may act as a force to retard that change: it is in itself neither inherently radical nor conservative, but constitutes ideas made concrete through use.

4) The transmission of cultural traditions follows social structural lines. These connections are grounded in socially segmented characteristics, including gender, class, occupation, ethnicity, and age. As a consequence, the likelihood of an individual having heard of a particular folk narrative, depends on his/her placement in groups within the community.

5) Folk narrative is performed in "appropriate" settings, the likelihood of which are determined by social structural factors that influence the built environment, temporal constraints, language use, interests, and the social organization of the family and community. Performance is limited and encouraged by structures that extend beyond cultural traditions and free choice.

These five assertions are deliberately broad, designed to capture the thrust and sweep of articles that have addressed questions beyond content and performance. They reflect a claim that there exists a tight weave among content, performance, and social structure. Ultimately the claim is not that one approach deserves priority, but that together they constitute vibrant folk narrative analysis.

While empirical claims about the reorientation of a discipline are controversial, particularly for a discipline that does not recognize that it has been reoriented, I believe that a fair reading of major American folklore journals and important books demonstrate that the concerns of the 1980s are not those of the 1950s or even the early 1970s.

Consider one of the most profound works of American folklore in the past decade, Henry Glassie's *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community.*[9] Glassie is not interested in a traditional community study or a survey of the folklore of a people. His goal is to situate the folklore as part of a social system, recognizing that the traditional material of Northern Ireland grows out of the political, economic, and religious nexus of that troubled land. The texts that Glassie presents are meaningful by themselves, but he means for them to be seen as both directing and channelled by the organization of the

[9] Glassie, H.: Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community. Philadelphia 1982.

community and the State. While Glassie's work is a most impressive example of this approach to folk narrative, it is not the only example.

Stanley Brandes in *Metaphors of Masculinity: Sex and Status in Andalusian Folklore*[10] has a similar, if somewhat more limited, concern: How do sex and status play themselves out in the folklore of Spanish men? Brandes recognizes the powerful effects of economic realities and gender relations on the sexual and aggressive folk narratives of Andalusian men and the conditions under which those narratives can be performed.[11] How are speech acts situated within the economic order (e. g., the structure of the olive harvest)? Fundamentally he asks how do images of the social structure (and the shared identities of members) connect to the institutional reality of that community. The approach incorporates the Marxist recognition of the material base of culture, while transcending the ideological assumptions made in classical Marxism.

A third volume which speaks to the same set of concerns, in a very different locale, is Simon Bronner's study, *Chain Carvers: Old Men Crafting Meaning.*[12] Bronner focuses on the individual craftsmen themselves, and demonstrates how their folk craft connects them into their southern Indiana communities. Wood chains are objects by which these elderly men are able to carve themselves a niche in their rapidly changing world, a world in which many of them are economically marginal. Further, these material artifacts permit them to engage a set of audiences with the legitimacy of their social position and status. Even though these chains are artifacts, they serve as the basis for narratives. Objects and talk are not dissociated; material culture provides a justification for narrative.

A fourth example of the Third Force in folklore is Janet Langlois's estimable monograph, *Belle Gunness: The Lady Bluebeard.*[13] Langlois demonstrates how the narrative accounts of a mass murderess are mediated by the structure of the Indiana small town in which those murders occurred. The historical changes that affect the community affect the folk narratives within it. Particularly noteworthy in this analysis is the discussion of gender as directing the images in the narrative. As folklorists are becoming more sensitive to issues of social and political structure, gender has become increasingly central. Indeed, of all the self-consciously labelled approaches to folklore, the approach that is most vigorous at present is undoubtedly Feminist folklore.[14] I include this named perspective with the bounds of the Third Force, because, to me, it seems like a special (albeit important) case of social structural analysis. The examination of the cultural conse-

10 Brandes, S.: Metaphors of Masculinity: Sex and Status in Andalusian Folklore. Philadelphia 1980.

11 See also Mechling, E.W./Mechling, J.: Shock Talk: From Consensual to Contractual Joking Relationships in the Bureaucratic Workplace. In: Human Organization 44 (1985) 339–343.

12 Bronner, S. J.: Chain Carvers: Old Men Crafting Meaning. Lexington 1985.

13 Langlois, J. L.: Belle Gunness, the Lady Bluebeard. Bloomington, Ind. 1985.

14 For instance, Journal of American Folklore: Special Issue on Folklore and Feminism 100 (1987) 390–585.

quences of gender-based treatment involves the same kind of problems of analysis in examining any division based on social segmentation.

These examples of research published in the last decade merely indicate the range of research that has been conducted by American folklorists. The number of studies could easily be multiplied by reference to recently published articles. Each study is far more sophisticated and detailed than I have presented, but each can be classified within the same paradigm. Culture must be examined through the lens of a socially differentiated, often conflictual, social structure, and the possibilities of social structural change or stability are affected by the cultural traditions that are common within a culture.[15]

## *Urban Legends and the Third Force*

In order to specify the utility of this approach, I shall examine a single domain of folk narrative in more detail: urban belief legends, particularly those legends that I have termed mercantile legends–legends that refer to the activities of large industrial or commercial organizations. To understand this body of material, I claim that it is necessary to examine content and performance in light of the structural setting in which they are embedded.

The analysis of these legends represents a relatively clear-cut example of this approach in that they address economic, political, and class issues. These legends address the relationship between community and the economic order.[16] Specifically these narratives reveal the deep ambivalence, and to some degree the distrust, that members of the public feel toward large business enterprises. Other stories relate to the ambivalence that Americans feel toward government and the world economy. The correlates of size are troubling, and this trouble is reflected in the content and performance of mercantile legends.

The legend about a rat served as a piece of fried chicken, attributed to the actions of employees of the Kentucky Fried Chicken chain, asserts that industrial horrors are common. These horrors are as "gross" and "disgusting" as those one once found in traditional gravestone or haunted house tales. Other legends refer to a mouse discovered at the bottom of a Coca-Cola bottle, hamburgers made of worm meat, and pizza topped with dog food. Narrators claim that clothing has snakes sewn in and that microwave ovens can be deadly. To make sense of these narratives, consumer beliefs must be examined.

[15] Shils, E.: Tradition. Chicago 1981; Calhoun, C. J.: The Radicalism of Tradition: Community Strength or Venerable Disguise and Borrowed Language? In: American Journal of Sociology 88 (1983) 886–914.

[16] Fine, G. A.: The Kentucky Fried Rat: Legends and Modern Society. In: Journal of the Folklore Institute 17 (1980) 222–243.

*Social Structural Conditions Influence Cultural Traditions*

The content of folk narrative is, theoretically, unlimited. A skilled performer can create numerous possible texts. Yet, storytellers wish to perform g o o d tales–narratives that are seen as appropriate and are to the teller's credit. As a consequence, the tale must be congruent with the moral basis of society. As Alan Dundes[17] emphasizes, out of many potential sources of tradition, only a few become solidified and enter into personal repertoires.

There are relatively few common urban legend types. The *Evil Corporation* type claims that a large, prominent corporation is consciously evil, typically because it is owned or controlled by a group that is denigrated in the public mind–Jews, Nazis, Arab terrorists, the Unification Church, or Satanists.[18] The *Deceptive Corporation* type claims that a company regularly adulterates its products. The rumor of McDonalds adding worms to their hamburgers is a recent, widely-known example of this theme. A third type is that of the *Careless Corporation*. These stories depict one-time product contamination. The accounts of poisonous snakes or insects found in clothing or bedding in department stores[19] are of this type, as are narratives about the Kentucky Fried Rat.[20] In these narratives the corporation is not depicted as intentionally evil, but its employees or suppliers are described as alienated and lacking concern. A fourth type describes *Beneficent Corporations*. Narrators claim that corporations will provide medical technology (or other social good) in exchange for product proof-of-purchases. According to these narratives, cigarette companies will provide kidney machines if consumers collect numerous empty packages.[21] These four legend types do not exhaust the stories in circulation, but they represent the major thematic elements in stories about corporations.

The post-industrial corporation is the modern Leviathan. The scale of these entities is so large as to provoke trepidation among some consumers. Their size removes a sense of control from the consumer. Even the fourth urban legend type–the *Beneficent Corporation*–reflects the same concerns, although in these tales the corporation is ostensibly portrayed in a positive light. Yet, the corporation is the only entity that has the resources to provide this medical treatment for the community, and it will do this only in exchange for consumer patronage. The narrative implies that communities have little choice except to accede to the will of the corporation. The organization of Western economies with an increasing share of the consumer goods and service market controlled by corporations provides the basis for these beliefs and legends. The fact that most of these

17 Dundes, A.: The Psychology of the Legend. In: American Folk Legend. ed. W. D. Hand. Berkeley 1971, 21–36.
18 Fine, G. A.: Among Those Dark Satanic Mills: Rumors of Corporations, Kooks, and Cults. In: Perspectives on Contemporary Legend. ed. P. Smith. Sheffield, in press.
19 Mullen, P. B.: Department Store Snakes. In: Indiana Folklore 3 (1970) 214–228.
20 Fine (above, not. 16).
21 id.: Redemption Rumors: Mercantile Legends and Corporate Beneficence. In: Journal of American Folklore 99 (1986) 208–222.

legends are about providers of consumer goods and services (e. g., department stores, fast foods, candies, soft drinks) is comprehensible in that these are the boundaries of the corporate economy to which consumers have most access. Consumers incorporate relevant economic realities into narrative. These legends do not reflect precisely how the economic order is structured, but they are a transformation of these realities.

### *Cultural Traditions Influence Social Structure*

The relationship between culture and structure is not unidirectional. Culture affects structure, just as structure affects culture. Although Ogburn[22] suggested that a "culture lag" exists in which cultural forms take awhile to catch up with structural changes, this need not always be so. In the case of urban legends, corporations operate in an environment in which the public believes–or at least spreads–these legends. Corporations attempt to protect themselves against rumors.[23] Although I know of no corporation that has been bankrupted by a rumor, over short periods corporations have been hurt. Frequently the corporations that are most likely to be targeted by these legends must portray themselves in their advertising and corporate publicity as a friend of the consumer. They take the public's attitudes into account in planning marketing strategies.

Legends, of course, do not have ultimate power. While these narratives can not eliminate the corporate state, they do constitute an expressive environment in which politicians can push for legislation which oversees, limits, or controls the power of corporations. Obviously I cannot demonstrate a direct and causal connection between urban belief legends and the passage of legislation and enforcement of regulation, although a single "gross" example can set the terms of debate. Yet, whether we can trace their direct effects, these belief legends provide an emotional environment for a variety of political rhetorics.

Further, urban legends may promote imitative behaviors. There is evidence, admittedly sketchy, that some individuals may wish to live out these narratives. The urban legend provides a recipe for behavior. For example, fast food workers who hear stories about employees urinating on the restaurant grill may try that trick themselves; some may even attempt to fry up a rat. Similarly customers who hear of mice found in Coca-Cola bottles and lawsuits won by consumers may attempt to place one themselves to gain recompense. Dégh[24] suggests that narratives about Halloween poisoning may provoke a rash of such claims as a means of gaining attention.[25] The narratives provide, in effect, an obdurate psychosocial reality in which social actors operate.

22 Ogburn, W. F.: Culture and Sociology. In: Social Forces 16 (1937) 161–169.
23 Koenig, F.: Rumors in the Marketplace. Dover 1985.
24 Dégh, L.: The Halloween Legendry. Paper presented to the American Folklore Society. Nashville 1983.
25 See Best, J./Horiuchi, G. T.: The Razor Blade in the Apple: The Social Construction of Urban Legends. In: Social Problems 32 (1985) 488–499.

### *Folklore and the Dynamics of Change*

Major change invariably represents a threat to members of a community. Traditional modes of action are transformed, and there is no certitude as to the manifest and latent effects of this change. Since folklore responds to anxiety,[26] narratives deal with those issues that surround social transformations. Urban legends have changed as the social problems (and the perception of these problems) shift. Jacqueline Simpson demonstrates that mercantile folklore was known in pre-Victorian Britain and was included by Charles Dickens in *The Pickwick Papers*. Dickens (through Sam Weller) cites the "fact" that a man was ground up into sausage meat and that a pieman used seasoned catmeat instead of veal. Simpson writes:

> "Whereas we would now regard the products of a local pieman, cooked on his premises, as superior to those from a factory, Sam distrusts them because he contrasts them with genuinely homemade pies individually prepared by some woman personally known to the eater of the pies."[27]

The theme of the greedy businessman versus the trustworthy housewife has its roots prior to the development of large food operations, but has changed in its form as consequences of the changes that have occurred within society. The story has been reformulated. In one sense the thematic character of such legends have changed. Once the individual entrepreneur was seen as the source of the contamination; in our age he or she is seen in league with the housewife against those "big players" who attempt to control the economy.

Change is reflected in folklore in ways that are more detailed than those I have just suggested. Details of texts are the most mutable components of folklore. A classic example is the widely known legend of the Death Car.[28] The price for which the car sells (while always incredibly inexpensive) increases with inflation. A Death Car selling now for only $ 50 would be t o o unbelievable, and could easily be dismissed. The details must match popular expectations. While "modern" legends can flourish over decades, narrators alter some of the descriptive features of these legends to fit their local circumstances.

### *Transmission Structures and Social Change*

As Dégh and Vázsonyi suggest,[29] narratives are diffused through communication channels or conduits. They argue against the implicit idea (that few would

26 Dundes (above, not. 17).
27 Simpson, J.: Urban Legends in The Pickwick Papers. In: Journal of American Folklore 96 (1983) 462–470, here 463 sq.
28 Dorson, R. M.: American Folklore. Chicago 1959, 250; Brunvand, J. H.: The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and Their Meanings. New York 1981, 20; Fine, G. A.: The Goliath Effect: Corporate Dominance and Mercantile Legends. In: Journal of American Folklore 98 (1985) 63–84, here 78.
29 Dégh, L./Vázsonyi, A.: The Hypothesis of Multi-Conduit Transmission in Folklore. In: Folklore. Performance and Communication. ed. D. Ben-Amos/K. Goldstein. The Hague/Paris 1975, 207–252.

actually defend in its most radical form) that diffusion is random or unpredictable. The conduit model of diffusion, in sharp contrast to the random transmission model, insists that folk narratives are spread by individuals who have personal relationships with each other and who knowingly choose which of their contacts will be their audience. In addition, position and status in a social structure affect the types of interests that narrators have and how they conceptualize the "performance rights" that stem from their position (e. g., the inability of political leaders to share risque or ethnically derogatory material in public[30]). Further, not everyone in a society knows each other (and acquaintanceship is not based on chance) or has the right to narrate–interaction opportunities channel how texts are spread. These characteristics of narrative provide folklorists with some predictive power about the transmission of texts.

In any heterogeneous society numerous social worlds or communities of interest exist. Individuals do not have equal access to folklore texts. The social structure of a community is decisive in fixing transmission patterns and in determining style of performance. An urban legend may be transmitted to a cynic, confirming his or her view of the business world, or it may be spread to a corporate executive, warning of threats to his or her corporation. Both might be judged as suitable audiences, but the way in which the narrative is performed might be quite different. Performance in these conduits is shaped to meet the implicit understandings that people have about others situated in the social structure. The decision whether and how to transmit a particular text is based upon one's image of the social structure, and upon expectations about what people in different locations in that structure expect and believe.

When I examined the diffusion of rumors about a "carbonated" candy causing a death in a young child, and subsequently being made illegal,[31] I discovered that structural features of the preadolescent community (age, sex, sports, team, school) affected who was likely to have heard the story. Opportunity structures and interest combine together to produce knowledge of the text. In other words, folk narratives are spread through socially segmented and differentiated channels. The analysis of diffusion depends on knowledge of lines of communication within an ordered social system. This analysis is grounded in the recognition that placement within a social system, determining both probabilities of interest and differential association, affects the extent to which particular folk narratives will be widely known.

### *Performance and Social Structure*

The performances of folk narratives are as affected by social structure as their transmission. For example, accounts about the Kentucky Fried Rat are frequently

30 Fine, G. A.: Humorous Interaction and the Social Construction of Meaning: Making Sense in a Jocular Vein. In: Studies in Social Interaction 5 (1984) 83–101.

31 id.: Folklore Diffusion Through Interactive Social Networks. In: New York Folklore 5 (1979) 99–125.

transmitted when friends are deciding where to eat or when they are seated at a fast food restaurant. In other words, the performance of these narratives was localized in time and space. The reality that many mercantile legends are told as true, or at least as plausibly true, suggests that the folk have accepted the legitimate existence of these enterprises and do not plan to revolt against the status quo. They are typically told as amusing but disturbing incidents. Simultaneously these narratives are rarely told as "set-pieces," but are told conversationally. The participants creatively engage in legend generation.[32] As part of this process, some tellers even explicitly deny that they know whether the narrative is factually accurate, but may ask others if they have heard that such a thing has occurred.

The effect of this style is to build community consensus through narration, and to provide an outlet in which members of the audience announce their attitudes toward the corporation being discussed, corporations generally, or the dangers of modern life. This consensus provides a groundwork that others can subsequently use for challenging or supporting the social structure.

Performances imply a recognition of the structural settings in which they are embedded. The normative demands of the setting channel the style and tone of the performance. In certain locations wide gestures and loud voices are proscribed. Decorum requires different sets of behavior as a function of audience expectation, given the environment. In urban belief narratives, the boundaries of appropriate performances are fairly broad. The locations where such narratives are typically performed are "informal places"–settings where rules of conduct are relaxed. Performances tend to be "energized" and "comic," rather than serious and controlled. Still, fast food establishments have time limits that control how long customers can remain. These limits, in effect, prevent the telling of an epic. Likewise, as fast food restaurants are entrepreneurial spaces, the amount of boisterousness may be policed, so as not to interfere with the expectations of other customers, preventing group singing.

The entire fast food establishment is not a single folk environment. All customers are not included within the same folk group. As this example emphasizes, the structured setting, part of the political economy of modern society, influences the type of performance that can occur. Performances are not only stratified and directed by immediate, local circumstances, but by norms that derive from the political and economic order and which were decided upon long ago and far away.

## *The Third Force*

The approach that I have put forth, and that I suggest is beginning to characterize American folklore, incorporates the large-scale structural components of

[32] See Dégh, L./Vázsony, A.: Legend and Belief. In: Folklore Genres. ed. D. Ben-Amos. Austin/London 1976, 93–123.

society into the examination of traditional social expression. Too often American folk narrative research has limited its goals. By focusing on content and the immediate context surrounding performance, folklorists have missed opportunities to connect the discipline to political and social questions.

Whereas anthropology and sociology have taken as their mission the understanding of social order and organization, American folklore, until recently, has been more passive, ignoring its connections to the structural social sciences and its materialist reality. This has been less so in Europe where an ethnographic and structural approach to folklore was always common, and where Marxism and other political theories have informed folklore studies. Even the "Great Team" of British folklorists at the end of the nineteenth century was intensively interested in these social questions.[33] Yet, in America such concerns have been relatively downplayed as folklore was more connected to literary and social psychological concerns than to politics and economics.

I do not argue that there have been no American folklore studies that have addressed how folklore fits into the social order. The problem is that such issues have not been recognized as a particular domain of folklore. The Third Force approach allows folklore to come to terms with the issues of structure, status, economics and politics that have been downplayed. I do not suggest, nor do I believe, that Marxism is an approach that folklorists should embrace, but I do believe that it is an approach that raises questions we need to address.[34] The questions of cultural Marxism are among the questions of folklore, even if we choose not to accept all the answers the Marxists give.

Culture is the indissoluble center on which any society is based, but it is a center that depends upon its economic and political periphery for giving it form and consequences. The approach that I suggest is one that if done systematically and diligently has the potential for transforming folklore into a central player in the game of the social sciences.

[33] Fine, G. A.: Joseph Jacobs: A Sociological Folklorist. In: Folklore 98 (1987) 183–193.
[34] For example, Zipes, J.: Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales. Austin 1979.