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Gramsci, Good Sense, and Critical Folklore Studies

ABSTRACT: This article addresses the scholarly lacunae surrounding Antonio Gramsci's contributions to folklore studies in the English-speaking world. It contends that Gramsci's critique of folklore has often been misunderstood because it has not been read in tandem with his comments on language, common sense, and religion, nor has it been contextualized by his discussions of distinctions among folklore, philosophy, and science. This article provides a close reading of Gramsci's commentaries and draws a brief comparison with the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer in order to adapt these ideas for contemporary research, reclaim folklore's political legitimacy, and promote a critical folklore studies that would overtly address political dilemmas and human suffering.

IN 1982, MORE than a quarter-century ago, Moyra Byrne called upon English-speaking folklorists to engage the work of Italian Marxist intellectual Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937). Remarkably few have accepted that challenge to date, and those who have done so generally emphasize Gramsci's direct comments on folklore (e.g., Dundes 1999; Limón 1983).¹ This limited engagement is understandable, however, as Gramsci did not present a favorable opinion of folklore—which he generally took to mean parochial cultural expressions such as superstitions—and often called for its eradication. While insisting that folklore “must not be considered an eccentricity, an oddity or a picturesque element, but something which is very serious and must be

taken seriously,” he nevertheless recommended that educators examine traditional customs in order “to know what other conceptions of the world and of life are actually active in the intellectual and moral formation of young people, in order to uproot them and replace them with conceptions which are deemed to be superior” (1985:191). As Byrne discerns, this paradox demonstrates that Gramsci approached folklore as an influential aspect of social life replete with political ramifications.

Recently, I presented a case for developing an overtly critical folklore studies—a mode of scholarly activity akin to critical cultural studies—whose production and application of critique and criticism would aim to enact more equitable social formations, redress human suffering, and interrupt oppressive political domination (Gencarella 2009, forthcoming). In this article, I intend to uphold Gramsci as a vital interlocutor for contemporary folklorists and demonstrate how his work contributes to a critical agenda. I make this claim saluting his already far-reaching influence in other critical research (such as the identity studies of Stuart Hall, the postcolonial studies of Gayatri Spivak, and the radical democratic project of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe) and his indefatigable conviction regarding the possibility of establishing a new hegemony and new political orientations.²

While at least one folklorist has lamented the “endless use of the terms ‘hegemony’ and ‘subaltern’ by [Gramsci’s] followers” (Davies 2001:115), both ideas have proven useful for others in folklore studies and related fields (e.g., Gates and Weller 1987; Gilman 2004; Limón 1994; Naithani 2006; Ó Giolláin 2000; Peña 1985, 1999, 2008; Porter 1993; Santino 1996; cf. Crehan 2002; Landy 1986; Woolard 1985). Because Gramsci’s ideas about hegemony so closely inform his views about folklore, it is worth reviewing this fundamental concept before proceeding to an analysis and adaptation of those views. As Raymond Williams details in his 1977 work *Marxism and Literature*, Gramsci’s conceptualization of hegemony incorporates and extends notions about ideology and culture. In searching for a way to explain how a small ruling class establishes and maintains dominance over large populations, Gramsci contends that those in power do not govern strictly by force; they must also obtain the consent of the dominated. Hegemony accordingly attends to consciousness, to ways of thinking. A regime achieves domination in part because others take its ways of thinking as the norm and come to accept their own status at the periphery.

For Williams, a twofold advantage recommends this concept over less refined Marxist ideas. First, it sutures domination and subordination to the processes of social organization and socialization—as Gramsci himself asserts, “[e]very relationship of ‘hegemony’ is necessarily an educational relationship” (1971:350). Second, it emphasizes cultural activity as basic rather than superstructural. As a lived process, hegemony is educative, radiating from cultural centers and deriving from a desire for prestige (cf. Ives 2009). As a relation of power between the ruling class and the dominated, hegemony forefronts identity construction as a fundamental political activity. Additionally, hegemony is never complete or exhaustive. There is never a single, eternal hegemony; hegemonic orders are in always in competition—rising, falling, incorporating, and being incorporated into others. Dominant hegemonies do arise, however, relative to other ways of organizing consciousness. And the struggle for hegemonic control unfolds at scales both local and global.

As this essay details, folklore is implicated in hegemony through several means. As a body of performances and localized knowledge, folklore records previous ways of thinking in hegemonies come to pass. More importantly for Gramsci, folklore bears a constitutive potential, insofar as a people are the ideas they believe and practice—the worldviews they embody and around which they construct identities. As he envisioned, a people limited to traditional, parochial worldviews and their inherent inconsistencies would remain unable to organize politically. Gramsci’s belief that folklore helped undergird the dominant regime of his time partly explains why he accused “the admirers of folklore, who advocate its preservation,” of intellectual teratology (1971:197): he regarded such a position as tantamount to preventing educational and political mobility. Any serious exploration of Gramsci’s perspective must respond to this vantage point.

A brief historical explanation of historical circumstances is warranted in order to understand Gramsci’s objection to folklore as it concerns his views on education. After unification in 1861, Italy remained divided culturally, economically, and politically between the industrialized North and the impoverished South (Gramsci 2006). In 1921 Gramsci helped found the PCI, the Italian Communist Party. Benito Mussolini led the National Fascist Party to power in 1922. The following year Giovanni Gentile, Mussolini’s Minister of Education, launched a major reform that maintained rather than ameliorated

regional differences. In 1924 Gramsci became Secretary General of the PCI and was elected to the Chamber of Deputies, the lower house of the Italian Parliament. Two years later, he was arrested in Mussolini's purge of oppositional parties and sentenced to twenty years imprisonment; Gramsci died a prisoner in 1937. In 1929, the year Gramsci began keeping his prison notebooks, the fascist government enacted the Lateran Treaty with the Roman Catholic Church, which among other actions, made catechism mandatory in public education. Gramsci felt that this mandate privileged religious inculcation over rigorous study. In response to what he regarded as a overt attempt to deny a majority of people access to education in science, philosophy, and institutional languages, Gramsci advocated for common schools guided by Marxist principles.

Akin to all Marxists, Gramsci championed the proletariat (the peasants and working classes) and the creation of a new hegemony that would represent their interests and impugn bourgeois ideology, fascism, and capitalism. As a key figure in Western Marxism—understood as “the revolt against the orthodox [Marxist] tendency to interpret the historical development of society solely in terms of the production of material objects”—Gramsci also attended to subjectivity, consciousness, “cultural objects[,] and spiritual factors in social development” (Femia 1987:2). He upheld the Communist Party as the vehicle for such transformation. Unlike orthodox Marxists, Gramsci did not envision the party as an entity charged with leading the proletariat; rather, he emphasized its duty to reeducate the subaltern about Marxism—what he called the “philosophy of praxis,” partially to mollify prison censors—and to strip the current ruling classes of prestige.

It is impossible in one article to review all the Gramscian concepts that have entered academic or everyday parlance, but in the first half of what follows I attempt to present a thorough examination of Antonio Gramsci's comments on folklore. I do this by setting those ideas within the wider context of his work, especially with respect to his notions of hegemony and education. Generally, Byrne and other English-speaking folklorists have concentrated on Gramsci's overt commentary in “Observations on Folklore,” a brief essay he wrote during his incarceration. These folklorists mention but do not explicate correlates to folklore such as language, common sense, and religion, nor do they discuss in detail his comparison of folklore with philosophy and science. This article seeks to rectify these lacunae and offer a

more nuanced appreciation of Gramsci's critique of folklore. I hope to demonstrate that such a revisioning is crucial for promoting critical folklore studies and advancing folklore's political viability.

Drawing upon Gramsci for the promotion of folklore and critical folklore studies is not a simple task, but upholding a Gramscian perspective does not equate to pious importation of his ideas. As Stuart Hall once rallied the Left under Thatcherism (1987, 1988), the point is not to treat Gramsci as a prophet nor his writings as tools, but rather to adapt his perspectives on politics to the contingencies of a particular historical moment. In contemporary American society, for example, many on the Right advocate religious instruction rather than science education; opposition to this agenda by the Left would remain consistent with Gramsci's critique of folklore. On the other hand, for obvious reasons Gramsci could not see the potential benefit of folkloric expressions for the labor and feminist movements, nor did he envision the role religion could play in advancing civil rights. Fortuitously, however, Gramsci himself laid the ground for such flexible mobilizations of folklore when he advocated "good sense," a phenomenon I will explore herein as a guide for navigating among folklore, philosophy, and science and as an entry point for promoting a more equitable political order through critical folklore studies.

Gramsci's Conceptualization and Critique of Folklore

Gramsci's "Observations" demonstrates familiarity with folklorists such as Giuseppe Pitrè, whose collections of Sicilian folklore he praises. Throughout his own writings, Gramsci designates several practices as "folklore": superstitions, magic, alchemy, witchcraft, beliefs in spirits, popular moralities, proverbs, fables, and certain motifs (including foresight of the blind or the restored noble hero) or conceptions associated with particular worldviews (including *lex naturalis*). In addition to these conventional forms, Gramsci contends that certain ideas, such as literary appearances of a Nietzschean *Übermensch*-type, may possess a "folk sense"; by this, he means depictions similar in motive to their philosophical counterparts, but not formal philosophical expressions (1985:355). Popular songs and regional or popular literature are related to folklore in the same manner. Indeed, Gramsci directs sharp censure at the (then still widely enjoyed) romance *Guerino il Meschino*,

composed in the fifteenth century by Andrea da Barberino. *Guerino*, writes Gramsci:

represents a specific kind of popular literature, the most elementary and primitive, which circulates among the most backward and "isolated" strata of the people: especially those in the South, in the mountains, etc. Those who read *Guerino* do not read Dumas or *Les Misérables*, let alone Sherlock Holmes. There is a determinate folklore and a determinate "common sense" which corresponds to these strata. . . . Observe how low the culture must be of those strata who read *Guerino* and how little interest they take, for example, in "geography" for them to be content with *Guerino* and to take it seriously. One could analyze *Guerino* as an "encyclopedia" to obtain information about the mental primitiveness and cultural indifference of the vast stratum of people who still feed on it. (1985:351)

Despite criticizing such works and the people who embraced them, Gramsci also rejected Italian literature that envisioned peasants as little more than "picturesque representatives of curious and bizarre customs and feelings" (1985:213). This seeming contradiction serves to presage Gramsci's general stance: he stands in solidarity with the working class and peasants, but calls them to aspirations beyond their immediate intellectual, social, and political environments.

This admonitory but invested perspective guides Gramsci's conceptualization of folklore. Folklore is a serious matter for him precisely because he considers it the "lowest level of popular culture" (1985:141), a traditional conception of the world potentially so recalcitrant as to become a veritable prison for those who understand the world only through its veil. In the "Observations," folklore is

a "conception of the world and life" implicit to a large extent in determinate (in time and space) strata of society and in opposition (also for the most part implicit, mechanical, and objective) to "official" conceptions of the world (or in a broader sense, the conceptions of the cultured parts of historically determinate societies) that have succeeded one another in the historical process. (1985:189)

In addition to his claim that folklore takes an antagonistic position toward official culture, Gramsci further submits that folklore is fragmentary—that is, not coherent, systematic, or consistent—precisely because it is stratified.³

The notion of fragmentation via stratification is essential to Gramsci's opinion of folklore and to his conceptualizations of language, com-

mon sense, religion, and even human personality. By stratification, he means that a particular body of knowledge serves as a repository for ideas once held by a dominant class and now dismissed.⁴ As an example of this process, Gramsci points to the Ptolemaic model of the cosmos, held as factual until the Copernican revolution. When scientists abandoned the Ptolemaic model, that ordering of the universe nevertheless continued as a widespread folk belief. In this manner, philosophy and science continually contribute “new elements to ‘modern folklore’ in that certain opinions and scientific notions, removed from their context and more or less distorted, constantly fall within the popular domain and are ‘inserted’ into the mosaic of tradition” (1985:189). Elsewhere, Gramsci wonders if Chinese and Indian belief systems will become treated as folklore (in the sense of erroneous or antiquated worldviews) as Western civilization and ideas infiltrate Asia, and he credits the prevalence of folklore in the Muslim world to a sizeable political distance between Islamic intellectuals and the people.

If folklore stands in opposition to the official part of society, it is helpful to examine the phenomena Gramsci assigns to dominant modes of thought and practice. Not surprisingly, modern science and philosophy lead the list. Gramsci also distinguishes the creative expressions of artists from folklore, identifying in folk art an attention to more localized aesthetics. Furthermore, the State—for Gramsci, the fascist government of Italy—stands ready to oppose folklore in order to replace it with allegiance to the regime: Gramsci recognizes that a government may be invested in eradicating folklore that challenges the legitimacy and worldview of the ruling party.⁵ Finally, Gramsci maintains that formal education in itself serves to correct the errors of folklore. In his discussion of the educational system prior to Mussolini’s government, for example, Gramsci asserts that children were taught science and “civic rights and duties” that “conflicted with the magical conception of the world and nature they absorbed from an environment steeped in folklore”—or as he states bluntly, “The school combated folklore” (1971:34).

Contemporary folklorists might find Gramsci’s commentaries troubling. On the surface, they appear to denigrate the subject and practices to which we have dedicated our careers. They also seemingly bear the hallmarks of a turn-of-the-century elitism that decreed folk thought primitive or antithetical to rational understanding. But Gramsci’s position is more complex than a cursory reading sug-

gests. To contextualize his stance, it is helpful to consider his radical reconceptualization of philosophy. Against a prejudice that upholds philosophy as a “strange and difficult thing” or the “specific intellectual activity of a particular category of specialists or professional and systematic philosophers” (1971:323), Gramsci argues that all humans are philosophers. He implies much by this claim, but unquestionably holds that education can permit everyone to achieve critical thought, self reflection, and a better comprehension of science, politics, and human society. He also believes that people may come to embrace the philosophy of praxis (that is, a realized Marxism) and improve the material conditions of their lives.

As evidence of the human capacity for critical thinking, Gramsci introduces the notion of *spontaneous philosophy*—perhaps a more appropriate term would be *vernacular philosophy*—as the ground from which more formal practices arise. The practice of spontaneous philosophy demonstrates the human penchant and desire for critical thought, even if that thought might be erroneous. Gramsci identifies three distinct but kindred forms of social expression that together constitute spontaneous philosophy: language, common and good sense, and popular religion and folklore. To appreciate and adapt Gramsci’s comments on folklore, it is imperative to understand these related expressions. Taken together, they temper his dismissal of folklore, setting his concerns in dialogue with a critical philosophy that promotes emancipation from oppression and fosters the creation of new political subjectivities.

Gramsci’s views on language are the most developed, and they provide a suitable barometer for his approach to the other forms of spontaneous philosophy.⁶ Although he attests that all humans possess an individual language in their style of speaking, he more regularly emphasizes language’s collective nature, noting that all social groups possess their own language. Several notions relevant to folklore inform Gramsci’s analysis of language. The first are, as aforementioned, *stratification* and *fragmentation*. As Peter Ives aptly summarizes, Gramsci offers “a theory of language as a historical institution that changes continuously” (2004:23). When discussing his ideas, for instance, Gramsci employs an archaeological trope:

The whole of language is a continuous process of metaphor, and the history of semantics is an aspect of the history of culture; language is at the

same time a living thing and a museum of fossils of life and civilizations. When I use the word “disaster” no one can accuse me of believing in astrology, and when I say, “by Jove!” no one can assume that I am a worshipper of pagan divinities. These expressions are however a proof that modern civilization is also a development of paganism and astrology. (1971:450)

Just as he regards folklore as a repository for dismissed ideas, Gramsci regards language as a repository for terms and practices whose original meanings transform over time. Language, like folklore, sustains both fossils and innovations; understood with a positive valence, this take on both modes of expression implies recognition of a potential—albeit not necessarily realized—nexus of tradition and creativity.

A second concept important to Gramsci’s notion of language is *dialect*. In his discussion of language and the arts, Gramsci identifies several grades or ranges of expression that span increasing geographic boundaries and influences: the provincial-dialect, the national-popular, the religious-civilization, and the politico-cultural (1985:123). Folklore exists at the provincial-dialect grade. On one level, the comparison simply indicates localized expression: as the dialect of Canton differs from those of Ballymenone and Sardinia, so too the folklore. For Gramsci, however, folklore’s status in the provincial remains more pressing, relevant to consciousness itself:

Someone who speaks only dialect, or understands the national language incompletely, necessarily has an intuition of the world which is more or less limited and provincial, which is fossilized and anachronistic in relation to the major currents of thought which dominate world history. His interests will be limited, more or less corporate or economic, not universal. (1971:325)

As one learns new languages, one learns new conceptions of the world. In Gramsci’s view, singular dialects, like folklore, may limit access to other conceptions and thereby curtail opportunities to participate in political and cultural movements.

A third concept connecting folklore and language is *irradiation*, an idea borrowed from Matteo Bartoli, the professor at the University of Turin who directed Gramsci’s (unfinished) thesis in linguistics. Bartoli was a pioneer in linguistic geography. Against the then-prominent neogrammarians, he emphasized several aspects of language use that are congruent with more contemporary performance-centered approaches, such as the role of culture in linguistic change, the emergence of

meanings within social contexts, and the nature of language as social activity. As David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith explain in their introductory remarks to one of Gramsci's essays, Bartoli's particular innovation lay in designing a method for examining "a set of 'areal norms,' according to which the earlier of two linguistic forms would be found in a peripheral rather than central area, an isolated rather than an accessible area, a larger rather than a smaller area" (1985:164). This kind of analysis could track the diffusion of languages and linguistic norms outward from centers of influence and mark historical changes wrought by conquest.

A fourth concept important to Gramsci's work (and again drawn from Bartoli) is the idea of competition among languages. Bartoli argued that as humans come into contact with one another, they must choose (or are compelled to choose) which language to speak and which linguistic expressions to privilege. Consequently, all languages compete constantly (though unevenly and incompletely), reflecting a history of political engagements. Bartoli's work in this area emphasized tensions between practices pushed to the literal periphery (such as the countryside or more remote geographical areas) and those current in economically and culturally powerful (and often urban) centers—and used to mark "peripheral" expressions as inferior. This dynamic of a radiating linguistic influence helped explain "how one people could conquer another not so much through the use of weapons, but rather by imposing customs and modes of thought" (Ives 2004:28). It is precisely this linguistic phenomenon that inspired Gramsci's notion of hegemony.

Through analysis of common sense—a second expression of spontaneous philosophy—Gramsci evaluates the politics of the vernacular. By *common sense*, Gramsci means the everyday philosophy of those who are not professional philosophers or intellectuals; the phrase refers to a "conception of the world which is uncritically absorbed by the various social and cultural environments in which the moral individuality of the average man is developed" (1971:419). As with all forms of spontaneous philosophy, in Gramsci's view common sense is closely linked to the fragmentation and stratification of philosophical, scientific, and political ideas throughout history, and it contributes to the maintenance of hegemonic orders; specific examples include theistic, Ptolemaic, anthropomorphic, and anthropocentric beliefs. Gramsci utilizes a spatial metaphor to explain common sense, locat-

ing it midway between folklore and science, but he also refers to it variously as philosophical folklore, the folklore of philosophy, a traditional conception of the world, and the philosophy of the “man in the street” (1995:301).

However, Gramsci does comment on noticeable differences between folklore and common sense. With respect to dynamism, for instance, Gramsci proposes that folklore tends to be more conservative than common sense both politically (that is, folklore is less progressive) and temporally (in his estimation, folklore is more reticent to change). And while folklore (like dialect) is often localized to a particular provincial region, common sense (like language) possesses a broader reach because it also negotiates class distinctions. Every social class bears its own common sense in competition with other classes and in relation to the hegemonic system that determines class hierarchy. The merit of common sense lies in its application of the principle of causality in judgment, which Gramsci regards as generally lacking in folklore, given the latter’s stress on tradition. The practical implication is that common sense encourages one to reflect upon class hierarchies, even when those rankings seem natural. According to Gramsci, folklore rarely promotes conditions that would foster this kind of reflexivity because it is the most conservative and traditional form of knowledge.

Gramsci’s novel distinction between common sense (*il senso comune*) and good sense (*il buon senso*) revolves around the relative degree of reflection. For Gramsci good sense is the “healthy nucleus” of common sense, a fundamental component that can and should be made “more unitary and coherent” through education (1971:328). Good sense is not, therefore, merely competent use of the most reasonable tactics permitted under a particular hegemonic order (such as keeping silent under fascism); rather, it is the empirical and social knowledge that promotes class consciousness, an understanding of the practices of a given hegemony, and an awareness of the philosophy of praxis. In its discriminating and coherent capacity, then, philosophy proper relates more closely to good sense than it does to common sense. Gramsci thus postulates progressively liberating forms of processing experience, from folklore, to common sense, to good sense, and then on to philosophy and science.⁷

To summarize thus far: folklore, common sense, and even language itself are constituents of spontaneous philosophy. Although not critical

in any formal way, each provides a conception of the world that demonstrates human proclivities for critical thought, and all are significant and ubiquitous aspects of human identity construction. Each mode is stratified and fragmented, preserving elements of previous historical periods, yet each is also dynamic to varying degrees, with folklore the most conservative among them. These formations are localized, in that different groups possess different folklores, languages, and common senses, and they compete politically with other cultural formations to become the official, the hegemonic, the center of irradiating influence—all part of what Gramsci calls a war of position.

The third form of spontaneous philosophy, religion, presents a special problem for Gramsci in both its institutional and vernacular manifestations. Gramsci regards religion as both a collective phenomenon and an individual practice. On the one hand, religion suffers from the same inadequacies as its spontaneous counterparts. On the other hand, the success and longevity of religious traditions demonstrate religion's hegemonic viability. For Gramsci, religion is more closely related to folklore than is common sense; he associates religious belief with superstition and deems both antithetical to modern science and philosophy. He does not claim folklore and religion are identical, however, as religion (like common sense) remains a more dynamic force. As with folklore and language, Gramsci contends that religion too is fragmented and stratified—he claims, for example, that Italians often practice paganism with a “Catholic husk” (1985:140)—and one of religion's liabilities is inconsistency between thought and action.

Although Gramsci considered institutional and popular religions ranging from Shinto to American Calvinism, his abiding preoccupation was Catholicism and its command upon the (Italian) masses. While he identified the philosophy of praxis as the explicit antithesis to Catholicism, he also perceived in the early Church a model upon which historical materialism might take root at all levels of society, since it could secure unity among disparate groups:

The strength of religions, and of the Catholic Church in particular, has lain, and still lies, in the fact that they feel very strongly the need for the doctrinal unity of the whole mass of the faithful and strive to ensure that the higher intellectual stratum does not get separated from the lower. The Roman church has always been the most vigorous in the struggle to prevent the “official” formation of two religions, one for the “intellectuals” and the other for the “simple souls.” (1971:328)

Throughout his notebooks Gramsci charts the labyrinthine alliances of the (Italian) Catholic Church, held variously with aristocrats, bourgeoisie, and peasants, and eventually precipitating “disciplinary arms of the papacy” (Fulton 1987:211) through the Counter-Reformation, condemnation of socialism, and treaties with Mussolini. In this account, Gramsci suggests that the predominant strategy of Catholic hegemony preceding the Reformation was re-absorption of popular movements, “the creation of new religious orders centered on strong personalities” such as Saint Dominic or Saint Francis, a practice that “stitched over” divisions between intellectuals and the people through vibrant solidarity (1971:331).

According to Gramsci, the Catholic Church imposed a more severe order on popular religious movements during the Counter-Revolution and frequently coerced its followers. This new approach assured unity, but in a manner quite different from the Church’s earlier embrace of popular movements. The new order aimed to divide intellectuals and commoners. On the one hand, intellectuals were disciplined “so that they need not exceed certain limits of differentiation and so render the split catastrophic and irreparable” (1971:331). On the other, the people were permitted celebrations, cults of saints, and their “crassly materialistic” expressions of popular religion as long as they professed to be Catholic. Furthermore, intellectuals were instructed not to neglect public rituals of baptism, marriage, and burial. Proclamation of faith, not harmonization, cemented this militarism. As a result, Gramsci wrote, religion in Italy had become “a pure narcotic for the popular masses” (1971:338), allowing the very few to retain control. This narcotic manifests in folklore:

See, in Pitre’s *Fiabe e leggende popolari* (p. 207), a popular Sicilian tale to which. . . . there corresponds a woodcut of old Venetian prints in which one sees God impart from heaven these orders: to the Pope: “Pray”; to the Emperor: “Protect”; to the peasant: “Toil.” The spirit of these popular tales depicts the conception of himself and of his position in the world that the peasant has resignedly absorbed from religion. (1985:334–35)

Gramsci sees the abandonment of the peasants and working classes as the failure of modern Catholicism, a failure made more sinister after the signing of the concordat with Mussolini’s government. He furthermore avers that the concepts of individual sin and individual spirit misrepresent humanity in that they neglect the role of other agents

and the natural world in identity and personality construction and thereby dismiss the necessity to address social problems. Despite this critique, Gramsci draws lessons from Catholicism for the philosophy of praxis. He notes, for example, that Church history demonstrates two necessities: first, to utilize repetition—"the best didactic means for working on the popular mentality"—since the masses are slow to alter their beliefs (1971:340); second, to avoid the Church's missteps by maintaining a close relationship between intellectuals and the people and promoting faith in one's social group and in the philosophy of praxis (1971:339).

These counterpoints help explain Gramsci's depiction of folklore as a force to be taken seriously, for he draws upon that mode of perception and expression in order to devise a plan for escalating Marxism in the face of fascistic and capitalistic hegemonic orders. The philosophy of praxis must be experienced as faith—but as an organic faith that promotes cross-class solidarity, evolves to define common sense, and transforms common sense into good sense warranted by a new political hegemony. Accomplishment of this process fulfills the promise of equality inherent in early Christianity, without the dire consequences that stemmed from the Church's alliances with power centers that upheld rigid class and social hierarchies. In drawing this conclusion, Gramsci comes to the question of education, as he considers the Church and the school the preeminent organizers of culture.

As mentioned earlier, Gramsci advocated the establishment of a common school in vehement objection to Mussolini's educational policies. The Gentile Reform mandated compulsory religious instruction, de-emphasized grammar and national language instruction, and effected a dramatic increase in vocational schools.⁸ In each case, Gramsci observed that the ruling class retained control by interrupting opportunities for creating solidarity among the subaltern. Religious instruction would essentially promote traditional, folkloric conceptions of the world. Lack of instruction in a national language would imprison people in dialects, thwarting participation in centers of power. Multiplication of vocational schools would maintain vast distance between ruling and working classes, reverting "to a division into juridically fixed and crystallized estates rather than moving towards the transcendence of class divisions" (1971:41).

The philosophy of praxis would counter such educational trends. As early as 1920, in his contributions to *Avanti!*, Gramsci portrayed the

school as a “crucible where the new spirits will be forged” (1985:42). His proposed common school would challenge provincialism by emphasizing national language, science, and civics education. Informal educational venues, such as newspapers and other public media, would likewise contribute to the effort. Gramsci endorses a public media intended to “satisfy the needs of a certain mass of readers, a mass which is intellectually most active, but only in the potential state, and which it matters most to develop, to make it think concretely, to transform it and homogenize it through a process of organic development that can lead it from simple common sense to coherent and systemic thought” (1985:413). In short, Gramsci sought a comprehensive education policy that would replace folklore with science and civics, common sense with good sense en route to philosophy, and a singular dialect with a standardized language and multilingualism.

This type of education would also promote the notion of self awareness as a historical construction. Following Marx, Gramsci professes that a “basic innovation” of the philosophy of praxis is “demonstration that there is no abstract ‘human nature,’ fixed and immutable (a concept which certainly derives from religious and transcendentalist thought), but that human nature is the totality of historically determined social relations” (1971:133). He asserts that human differences lie not in race or skin color, nor unity in the capacity for reason; unity and difference arise from the social conditions through which one fosters identity.

Human personality is thus intertwined with folklore, language, and common sense, especially in its initial formation. One’s personality could be “strangely composite,” containing “Stone Age elements and principles of a more advanced science” (1971:324), depending on the group conditioning its constitution and establishing parameters for ratified performances of self. Gramsci writes that active or passive identity pertains to acceptance or rejection of

a conception of the world mechanically imposed by the external environment, i.e. by one of the many social groups in which everyone is automatically involved from the moment of his entry into the conscious world (and this can be one’s village or province; it can have its origins in the parish and the “intellectual activity” of the local priest or the aging patriarch whose wisdom is law, or in the little old woman who has inherited the lore of the witches or the minor intellectual soured by his own stupidity and inability to act). (1971:323)

Critical thought is requisite to break from passivity. "The starting-point of critical elaboration," Gramsci declares, "is the consciousness of what one really is, and is 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory" (1971:324). Self awareness, then, becomes understanding of self as a site of confrontation between hegemonies. Education, properly accomplished, promotes recognition of the historical and social construction of identity, encourages consistency of thought and action, and nourishes discerning analysis of spontaneous philosophies.

Gramsci ultimately rejects folklore and common sense (or at least their reactionary elements) as parochialisms that impede maximum critical praxis and solidarity, but he does not call for their *immediate* eradication. Here he differs from orthodox Marxism's conviction that class consciousness would emerge rapidly following the unveiling of false consciousness. Instead, Gramsci approaches education of the masses as a slower process, one not bound to "theoretical enunciation of 'clear' methodological principles," but rather "articulated and graduated," built upon actual experience (1985:418). The implications are far reaching. As José E. Limón explains this concern, "teachers are primarily responsible for *sensitively* bringing a larger consciousness to the masses" (1983:42). Abrupt revelations accomplish little; changes in thought require adaptive repetitions and combinations.

What would happen, ponders Gramsci, if elementary schools taught science only on the basis of relativity rather than basing instruction on more traditional notions of nature? Students would learn nothing and a rift would open between education and family life. Pedagogy must therefore begin with what people already know, with the spontaneous philosophies they acquire in primary social environments. Education must function as a *making* of coherence over time, not an immediate imposition. On several occasions Gramsci recognizes that the philosophy of praxis, as a philosophy for the masses, must accept common sense as its starting point. Accordingly, Gramsci grants that the "spontaneous" masses should be educated, not despised.

Gramsci therewith establishes a difference between merely "bookish" scholarship and an education that matches theory with practice. The task of intellectuals is to organize and diffuse moral and educational reform, and to deliver people from common sense, to good sense, to the philosophy of praxis. The creation of a new culture must

articulate truth historically so that it is expressed in appropriate ways and through appropriate language. To accomplish this, instructors must “study and develop the elements of popular psychology, historically and sociologically, actively (i.e. in order to transform them, by educating them, into a modern mentality)” (1971:197). Not surprisingly, Gramsci encouraged teachers to study folklore.

This pedagogical agenda is important for locating Gramsci’s contribution to folklore studies. Gramsci did not designate certain people as “folk” in an essentialist or permanent cast. Instead, he understood folklore to be discursive practices that constitute folk identity. Even though he intimated that most humans—or, minimally, most Italians of his time—are born into provincial and subaltern strata, he held that everyone may transcend initial enculturation. And quite unlike many of his contemporaries, who justified rigid distinctions between folk and intellectual, Gramsci sought a radical shared identification between the two and promoted the emergence of new intellectuals from the working class.⁹ For Gramsci, overcoming reliance upon folkloric knowledge constitutes an early stage in the demolition of class inequality; this is why he indicts his fellow folklorists’ admiration for the object of their study as misplaced desire, complicit in a system of oppression and hegemony that benefits the few.

On the Natural Inclination of Human Beings toward Folklore

In the remainder of this essay, I would like to consider how a Gramscian-inspired understanding of spontaneous philosophy and good sense may assist a critical folklore studies. To do so will dissolve rather arbitrary boundaries still remaining between folklore studies and cultural studies, at least with respect to data and subject matter. In analyzing the sway of the dominant class, Gramsci depicts the press as the “most prominent and dynamic” way to garner and disseminate consent, but not the only means to hegemonic control; to the contrary, he believes that anything able to influence public opinion, from schools to “the layout and names of streets” (1985:389), can help to create and bolster a status quo. Folklore ranks among these influences, certainly, and as such should be understood together with rather than distinct from popular media.

Gramscian-inspired folklore studies would move beyond description to more overtly political analyses, and then to interventions. They

might focus, for example, on folkloric phenomena in competition with other expressive forms; examine folklore's negotiation between the local and the State; analyze its educative or formative roles in identity construction; determine its "location" at the center or periphery of hegemonic struggle; follow its influences, both geographic and intellectual; engage its challenge to particular ideologies; or examine counter-hegemonic and "subterranean tactics of resistance" (Abrahams 2005:139). Such research might also attempt a historical analysis of fragmentation, although Gramsci warns there is "nothing vainer than to try to find the different stratifications in a single area of folklore" (1985:195).

Unique to a Gramscian approach—and to a critical folklore studies based upon it—is the urgency of *acclimating* folklore and its correlates for political action and social change. The longstanding division between academic and public-sector folklorists becomes unimaginable in this perspective, and the distinction between professional and amateur becomes unthinkable; both become unified in promoting progressive activism and fostering a new hegemony. As Gramsci's own political involvement demonstrates, activists of this sort might seek employment not only in universities, art councils, state folklife programs, and archives, but also at every level of government (especially in departments and boards of education) and in grassroots and public organizations such as unions and agencies that influence educational policy and reform.

A Gramscian perspective begins with the recognition that one's conception of the world—the way one envisions and enacts mass solidarity—is always contested: progressive or conservative, socialist or neoliberal, anti-racist or racist, democratic or fascistic orientations will always compete with each other as they strive to become centers of irradiation. Furthermore, social change does not occur naturally or by the goodwill of policymakers; a serious rhetorical investment is required to create the conditions for change. Primary among these is the forging of new collective identities, which for Gramsci necessitates an intimate proximity between intellectuals and the people they represent, as well as incorporation of popular movements, attentiveness to language as it influences consciousness, careful repetition and articulation of novel ideas, and promotion of an international rather than a parochial perspective.

A critical folklore studies has much to contribute to such a program. First, this kind of disciplinary orientation would stand with those who argue that folklore scholarship is never neutral—and that when it seems to be so, it is probably adhering to the status quo and upholding current structures of domination. Second, it would demand, as Roger Abrahams recently suggested, “insight into our role as commentators on the process and the ways in which our discipline should expand its subject” (2005:216). This could require the conceptualization of certain social formations, such as racism or homophobia, as folkloric in nature. Such critical scholarship might also need to venture into exploring subjectivities much “larger” than the “small” groups to which American folkloristics has become accustomed. Third, it would adopt a model of scholarship that, in accepting its political nature and task, openly seeks to promote certain conceptions of life and intervene against others through the production of critique. A critical folklore studies may readily complicate hegemonic paradigms, for example, by demonstrating their injustice and advising contrarian perspectives or categories. It might also name names, as it were, and advocate for or against specific policies. It would certainly seek alliances to influence public opinion.

Such political investment inspires the more speculative idea I wish to entertain. From a Gramscian perspective, folklore never faces extinction. It is fundamental to human experience, especially in the primary constitution of subjectivity and communities. Arguments that folklore is increasingly being replaced by popular—especially mediated—culture mistake form for proclivity and misunderstand that nascent philosophies, sciences (including media technologies), and ideologies will inevitably produce new folklore. For Gramsci, we all begin our lives in the context of spontaneous philosophy, and while we may “sharpen” our human capacity for critical thought, we are also driven by a desire to replicate those formative expressions. Hence this section’s title, a play on Hans-Georg Gadamer’s essay “On the Natural Inclination of Human Beings toward Philosophy” (1981).

Thorough examination of Gadamer’s contribution to folklore studies must await future research. Here, I offer an invocation around ideas resonant with Gramsci’s, such as common sense and the science/philosophy distinction. Gadamer and Gramsci are rarely considered together, and they differ on numerous matters, not the least of which is Gadamer’s general praise for bourgeois culture and his avoidance

of political pronouncements. These two scholars share, however, a commitment to philosophy, to the conditions that lead to critical practice and self knowledge. In addition, Gadamer (1900–2002) lived to experience the horrors of the Second World War, the Cold War, and the arms race. His comments on the relation between philosophy and science complement Gramsci's, and through their work I intend to demonstrate folklore's continued political importance in human affairs.

Not surprisingly, Gramsci's comments on science are complexly woven. Although he acknowledges certain criteria necessary for critical scientific consciousness, he repudiates positivism and reliance on the natural sciences. Instead, Gramsci proposes that each field of research entails an appropriate method. In general, he defines science as reproducible experimentation established on laws of regularity, coordination, and causality, or the "most economic description of reality" (1995:290). Science is predicated on demonstrable proof that is contestable in ways common sense is not, as the latter maintains a certainty granted by its association with religion or metaphysics. For Gramsci, science has two aims: to correct ways of knowing, and to elevate "objectivity" by classifying phenomena as either arbitrary/individualistic or essential/common.

That said, science as *practiced* by humans is free from neither subjectivity nor ideology; rather, it is "the union of objective fact with a hypothesis or system of hypotheses that go beyond the mere objective fact" (1995:293) and so competes with other authoritative formations, including religion. This is so because science (like spontaneous philosophy) is also historical human action. It is "bound to needs, to life, to the activity of humanity" and its ultimate interest is not neutral laws of the universe but cultural influence (1995:292). Given this human component, science itself may become superstitious when popularized or come to substitute for the very "witchcraft" it defies, as when humans treat technology as a new messiah. The only antidote for such misuse, Gramsci proffers, is the sober explanation of science—that is, education that restores coherence and prevents science from collapsing into folklore or becoming known and practiced by a select few.

Gadamer likewise conceptualizes philosophy and science as activities distinct from folklore, although he refers to *legend* or *myth* rather than directly employing the term *folklore*. His (brazenly Western-centered) claim that the first enlightenment occurred in ancient Greece,

for instance, suggests that this advance took place “when the view of life enshrined in the epics and myths of Homer and Hesiod was dissolved by the new passion for discovery” (1998:71). But although Gadamer alleges a dialectical relationship between philosophy and science, he demonstrates acute distress that in his day interest in science has fallen prey to an obsession with technology, resulting in philosophy’s exile.

In Gadamer’s historical reconstruction, science and philosophy were unified in ancient Greece. The advent of modernity in the seventeenth century, wrought by the new science of Galilean mechanics, subordinated philosophy to science. This bifurcation continued, he suggests, throughout the eighteenth century. Increased association of science with technology led to the encroachment of automatism and the eventual misuse of scientific mastery over nature. In the twentieth century, the exponential increase of information combined with vast opportunities for technological control of public opinion resulted in a crisis of alienation as people became incapable of establishing stable identities. The irony is that although applied science was expected to banish “all unpredictability from life,” such “radicalized faith” both discouraged human responsibility and demoted philosophical enterprise around convention, tradition, and practical judgment (1981:147–48).

Science, in its modern sense, is “no longer the quintessence of knowledge and of what is worth knowing, but a way,” a body of knowledge regulated through experimentation and culminating in technological application (1981:69). In Gadamer’s view, the empirical sciences have come to emphasize method, induction, and what he calls “methodical knowability,” all of which are means to determine certitude; in consequence, the sciences renounced comprehensive knowledge. Gadamer thus identified the corruption of science that Gramsci had only implied when he cautioned against its improper popularization. At issue is whether human solidarity and practical reason can be restored and revived in a technological civilization so distant from philosophy and its fundamental questions about humanity.

For Gadamer, philosophy—that which possesses no positive datum and cannot be investigated empirically—solicits the whole and searches for unity, distinguishing it from the technical aims of science. “The understanding of our life world as deposited in our language,” he claims, “cannot be fully resolved by means of the possibilities of knowledge available to science” (1981:12). “Understanding” is, of course, a term

central for Gadamer. It does not denote Marxist class consciousness, but points to a broader sense of interpretation—hermeneutics—and self understanding, including one's relation to others. Understanding begins not in the search for certainty, but in queries such as "Why is there anything at all and not nothing?" and "How should we understand that this self-illuminating luminosity that we call consciousness will eventually come to an end?" (1981:145).

Gadamer regards the restoration of equilibrium, a reintegration of science and philosophy, as the central challenge facing humanity. To be clear, Gadamer's treatment of fragmentation differs substantially from Gramsci's; he intends for *human* solidarity to be realized, not for subaltern class solidarity to overthrow fascism and bourgeois ideology. For Gadamer, the "intense urgency" of "bringing a people to self-understanding of themselves" is not directed toward political revolution, and he dismisses outright the possibility that self estrangement is caused "by the peculiarities of the capitalist economic order alone" (1981:149).

Yet despite this intractable political difference, there is reason to bring Gadamer and Gramsci into conversation on the subject of philosophy. For Gadamer, philosophy is in exile but it is not dead. The desire to know—that which Plato nominated as the origins of philosophy—is a natural inclination. In a style roughly comparable to Gramsci, Gadamer affirms:

[T]here are no people who do not "think" sometime and somewhere. That means there is no one who does not form general views about life and death, about freedom and human living together, about the good and about happiness. (1981:58)

All humans possess the potential for philosophical thought because all humans desire knowledge. Gadamer cites Aristotle on this point, but additionally mentions as evidence the curiosity of children, as well as "man's slow progress of settling into this organized world that surrounds him, his participation in the linguistic communication of all with all" that leads "down the path of *Bildung* (cultivation)" (1998:67–68). *Bildung* is one of the four guiding concepts of humanism identified by Gadamer in *Truth and Method* (1989). Common sense, judgment, and taste are its correlates.

Length prohibits detailed analysis of Gadamer's history of common sense (cf. Schaeffer 1990). However, the necessary conditions he

admits are responsive to Gramsci. According to Gadamer, common sense turns on the probable and is crucial for founding communities and rendering judgments about right and wrong vis-à-vis the common good. It relates, Gadamer continues, to the ancient concept of *phronesis*—practical and moral knowledge that governs action. Phronesis itself is directed toward concrete situations, focused on means and ends, tied to self understanding, and inclined to guide practice by means of reason instead of animalistic instinct. “Not mere indoctrination or accession to custom” (1998:58), phronesis is nevertheless communal and rhetorical, as one demonstrating it “is aware of the normative viewpoints he follows and knows how to make them effective in the concrete decision demanded by the practical situation” (1981:48).¹⁰

Gadamerian phronesis corresponds, I contend, to Gramscian good sense. Furthermore, the two perspectives adjudicate an equilibrium. Gramsci’s good sense is decidedly political, correcting Gadamer’s more neutral representation of phronesis, which in antiquity was conceptualized as a robustly political rather than strictly philosophical resource. For his part, Gadamer’s phronesis demonstrates beneficial employment of common sense (as well as religion) and tempers Gramsci’s negativism. Together they suggest that folklore, philosophy, and science are natural to the human condition. If this is so, the answer to Gadamer’s following inquiry is certainly “no”:

Should the questions to which science does not know the answer be shunted aside even though they still concern the human mind and have called forth the grand answers of the religions, the mythologies, the artistic creation like the tragedies, and intellectual works like the Platonic dialogues? (1981:149)

To ignore questions unanswerable by science contradicts the human condition. Thus folklore’s significance, whether as a model for political action or as a resource for answering grand questions about humanity.

How, then, to conceptualize this relationship intellectually and politically? Lurking in the writing of both Gramsci and Gadamer is an arborescent rather than rhizomatic metaphor (to borrow from Deleuze and Guattari 1987) for describing the relationship between folklore, philosophy, and science. In Gramsci, for example, one climbs from folklore to the summit of philosophy (despite his critique of Catholicism, Gramsci employs remarkably Catholic imagery in his depiction of knowledge as ascension—perhaps this is telling of how deep in the

bone hegemonies breed). Yet there are other ways to configure the relations among modes of perceiving and acting in the world. The following offers a rhizomatic model:

I must offer some preliminary remarks upon the utility of this model. First and foremost, it intends no replication of the magic-religion-science paradigm that occupied early anthropologists and social theorists. Classificatory schema can be dishonest and colonialist, and I wish to avoid that sordid legacy. Here, the aim is more modest: to do justice to the Gramscian arboreal conception (which is also decidedly Western in its orientation) while at the same time reframing it for contemporary critical action. This model attempts to preserve the distinctions Gramsci and Gadamer draw between different bodies of knowledge while also advocating their interdependence. It submits that these categories of knowing bear closer intellectual and political relation than Gramsci's work presumes, and that we might profitably imagine them a *trias politica*, each indispensable for balancing the other in non-fascist society.

Accordingly, this model seeks to demonstrate the possibility of simultaneous tensions and alliances among these bodies of knowledge that may push against the anti-democratic tribalism characteristic of a contemporary world dominated by technocrats and religious fanatics. This model is not meant to confirm unconditional or universal categorical distinctions that have been established *a priori*. It instead recognizes that such definitions are themselves acts of power. If any recommendation harbors here, it is that impositions of distinction among practices in a given locality are worth attending to. Such distinctions—which signal a community’s ratified forms of thought and action—are important political issues, especially in the context of Gramscian-inspired research.

Critical awareness requires more than accepting that particular groups may recognize no difference between science and magic, while others may strive over their boundaries, while still others may privilege one mode and outlaw the other. Critical awareness is also more than the appreciation that one group’s religion may be another group’s magic. At issue is who determines the boundaries and hierarchies of science, philosophy, and folklore, and how those parties police and discipline the distinctions. Moreover, this model of critical awareness recognizes that politics, in the simplest terms, is a struggle to define and control common sense as the intermediary between all other modes of practice. Such a perspective certainly honors Gramsci’s contribution while moving it into contemporary political arenas.

Finally, this model attempts to recalibrate Gramsci’s notion of good sense. Instead of conceptualizing it as an improved common sense, I propose that good sense be understood more holistically as *phronesis*: a management of these bodies of knowledge in situated performance, attentive to particular social circumstances and political judgments. This is why “good sense” does not appear in the figure above; I conceptualize it instead as a navigational guide among the categories (cf. Gadamer 1981:91 on *prohairesis*). In this way, the exercise of good sense is always historically situated and forefronts ethics and politics as the address—or redress—of others. Such judgment is rendered in context; it is not a method or technique. As such, it is an inventive practice, bound to the conditions that the ancient Greeks called *kairos* (timeliness), *dunamis* (possibility), and *to prepon* (appropriateness) as defined by the local community and its relation to a cultural hegemony, even as one seeks to alter that hegemony.

Practically speaking, good sense necessitates judgment about which body of knowledge to employ in a given situation. Sometimes folklore would be a paramount factor, and sometimes philosophy or science. Scientific description of decomposition might not be comforting at a funeral, just as a belief narrative might be inappropriate when one is in desperate need of comprehending gravity. Prayer might constitute good sense under certain conditions, and chemotherapy under others. (And sometimes neither would be useful, and sometimes both.) The point is that folklore remains a viable resource for judgment and action rather than something to be discarded altogether. By advocating this position, a critical folklore studies enters ongoing debates about political judgment, the status of prudence in the postmodern world, and the “recovery and appropriation of the type of practical reasoning, knowledge, and wisdom that is characteristic of *phronesis*” (McGee 1998:19).

In the proposed schemata, consistent identification with one category against all others violates good sense personally—for to be human is to experience the range of human activities—and politically, as human relations must be worked out in specific cases, even when shared commitment to the meaning of certain values exists. Against ideologies that permit little interaction between categories or that assign human bodies to one alone, this model calls attention to the balance of power and practical judgment as core principles of democratic culture. Perhaps a vibrantly radicalized democracy would advance an educative matrix that maximizes opportunities for all humans to engage folklore, philosophy, and science together, debating which reflects good sense in situated performance and which combination of perspectives should be employed in order to instantiate new collective political identities.

From this vantage point, a critical folklore studies would take sides, sometimes for and sometimes against folklore, depending on context and relation to equitable social formations. Intelligent design, for example, offers several opportunities as a topic for conventional studies of folk belief. Yet its recent infiltration into public school systems—the decision of *Kitzmiller vs. Dover Area School District* heralding folklore over science—demonstrates the urgent need for a critical folklore studies, one observant of Gramsci’s admonition against parochialisms that would disprivilege certain citizens. In a similar vein, cognitive science often demonstrates the limitations of folk psychology, medicinal bio-

chemistry tests the efficacy of homeopathy, and evolutionary biology questions the strength of creationism. But it does not follow that all religious expressions or superstitions are undemocratic or socially dangerous, as has been argued recently by a range of cultural commentators, including Christopher Hitchens in *God Is Not Great* (2007), Richard Dawkins in *The God Delusion* (2008), and Bill Maher in his comedic documentary *Religulous* (2008).

In opposition to these public demands for a world cleansed of religion, a critical folklore studies could raise the question of whether the scientized, rationalized world they envision is one that respects democratic alterity—or even one worth living in at all. This question would be an adaptation of Gramsci's critique of elite intellectualism—and one that would reject his own Marxist atheism in favor of solidarity with religious people who share a commitment to radical democratic values. Similarly, as Gramsci understood, capitalist ideology does not dismiss all religion. In the contemporary world, its cultural hegemony readily promotes prosperity theology or traditionalist defenses of the free market (Woods 2005), even as it demotes progressive social gospel movements and liberation theology. Its radical corrective may lie, then, in alliances between critical atheists and the latter religious traditions, through which new subjectivities may arise to shape public opinion and policy.

Again, the aim is not to extol folklore unconditionally. Specific cases may require its replacement to achieve equality or other commitments to social change. But by promoting education attentive to good sense and focused on the political uses of folklore, folklorists and the communities they work with may develop avenues for action relevant to the propagation of a more democratic and equitable cultural hegemony. This schemata—as something to think with, not conform to—accommodates Gramsci's stance while maintaining a consequential political role for folklore; further, it responds to his own suggestion that “the spirit of folklore studies should be changed, as well as deepened and extended” (1985:191). As he himself concludes:

Only in this way will the teaching of folklore be more efficient and really bring about the birth of a new culture among the broad popular masses, so that the separation between modern culture and popular culture and folklore will disappear. An activity of this kind, thoroughly carried out, would correspond on the intellectual plane to what the Reformation was in Protestant countries. (1985:191)

Folklore studies, especially when promoted as critical and political activity, are integral to birthing a new culture. To follow this pursuit, folklorists should wrestle with instead of neglecting the insights Gramsci offered so many decades ago.

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Notes

1. A notable earlier exception is a collection of essays dedicated to Folklore Studies in Italy in this journal, 11/1–2 (1974).

2. When I refer to a Gramscian-inspired “new hegemony,” I specifically mean a progressive, radical, social democratic order in opposition to an ascendant neoliberal, neoconservative, late capitalist hegemony (cf. Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Such a position is predicated on economic justice and resistance to racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, xenophobia, and other pernicious social formations of inequity.

3. See Alberto Cirese’s effort to resolve the “tension and conflicts that border on the edge of ambiguity” in Gramsci’s definition (1982:224).

4. Gramsci contends that even with radical changes, some strata “are still immersed in the culture of preceding historical situations, including sometimes the one that has most recently been superseded” (1971:453); cf. folklore as the “reflection of the conditions of cultural life of the people, although certain conceptions specific to folklore remain even after these conditions have been (or seem to be) modified or have given way to bizarre combinations” (1985:190). This is akin to notions of “survivals” introduced by earlier anthropologists such as Edward Tylor.

5. It should be noted, however, that Gramsci did not think the fascist regime so opposed to folklore; to the contrary, he thought that Mussolini’s government promoted folklore in order to forge a fascist nationalist identity and to keep large segments of the population ill-informed. For further information, see Cavazza 1987, Gunzberg 1983, and Simeone 1978.

6. Scholars have been reticent to attend to Gramsci’s views on language. Franco Lo Piparo (1979) published the first major study; cf. Peter Ives (2004), who coins the term “vernacular materialism” to describe Gramsci’s approach.

7. Cf. Diana Coben (2002), to whom I am indebted for inspiration to represent Gramsci’s ideas visually. For other discussions of Gramscian good sense, see Coben’s bibliography.

8. See Livia Giacardi (2006) on the Gentile Reform’s reorganization of the system of student progress originating in the Casati Act of 1859.

9. Due to space limitations, I cannot fully explain here Gramsci’s distinction between traditional and organic intellectuals. Briefly, traditional intellectuals are those set apart as an elite profession, usually through overt alliance with the dominant political class. Organic intellectuals are those who emerge from working class and everyday circumstances, whose intellectual labor benefits their class, and who are positioned to help organize peripheral groups in solidarity to advance a new hegemonic order.

10. For Gadamer, such “concrete practical discernment” maintains a “reciprocal” relationship with the “universal desire to know” (1981:112). Gadamer specifically means practical philosophy here, and he cautions against confusing practical philosophy with one of its virtues, such as phronesis (117). Yet the linkage is a salient point of comparison with Gramsci, as elsewhere Gadamer insists: “Practical philosophy presupposes that we are already shaped by the normative images or ideas in the light of which we have been brought up and that lie at the basis of the order of our entire social life. That does not at all suggest that these normative perspectives remain fixed immutably and would be beyond criticism. Social life consists of a constant process of transformation of what previously has been held valid” (135).

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