6. Folklore and Poverty

Folklore was distant from the observer, necessitating a journey outwards from the big cities, westwards towards the most remote, isolated and backward rural districts, and downwards, towards the poorest and most humble stratum of settled rural society. The social distance is obvious in the literature, yet is rarely commented upon except in the most superficial way. In fact poverty and isolation were necessary to the specificity of folklore since prosperity and integration of necessity involved the assimilation of modern values inimical to it. The key observers, that is those such as Yeats and Ó Duilcharga who helped to shape the folkloric discourse in Ireland, took a strong position against the materialism of a modern urban, industrial world and a fatalistic view, coloured by a nostalgic Romanticism, of the inevitable decline of folklore communities. How could they come to grips with the poverty of the storyteller if it seemed to be the precondition of his or her art?

Those who idealized the Gaeltacht, the locus of Irish folklore *par excellence*, were aware that it was among the poorest parts of rural Ireland. Moreover, the best storytellers and the best speakers of Irish were among the poorest of its inhabitants. Already in 1891, the Congested Districts Board had been established to deal with the severe poverty of the West. As editor of An Claidheamh Soluis from 1903 to 1909, Patrick Pearse showed an awareness of the social realities of Irish-speaking communities and discussed problems such as tuberculosis in Connemara, poverty and emigration (although in his fiction, ‘his creation of an idealized Irish-speaking West was a fully conscious aesthetic strategy’). Irish-language periodicals wrote unsentimentally about rural depopulation, celibacy, late marriage and other problems of the West. The Gaelic League campaigned against emigration and had a question for the 1900 Oireachtas essay competition on ‘Irish Emigration – its Causes and Effects’. It seems to have been through the anti-emigration campaign that Pearse saw the necessity both for state intervention and the encouragement of self-reliance to eradicate poverty, a recognition that would of course in time evolve into the more fully developed if idiosyncratic socialism that won the respect and trust of James Connolly, as Philip O’Leary puts it.³

Douglas Hyde and Lady Gregory were aware of the poverty of those from whom they recorded their tales and songs. The narrators of the stories in Beside the Fire, according to Hyde, were ‘to be found only amongst the oldest, most neglected, and poorest of the Irish-speaking population’ while speakers of English ‘either do not know them at all, or else tell them in so bald and condensed a form as to be useless’.³ Hyde’s most important source for An Sgeuladh Gaedheach was Proinsias Ó Conchubhair, an inmate of the Poor House in Athlone, who sent him stories as he heard them from other inmates. Hyde commented on his unfortunate circumstances: ‘How sad that the Poor House then was the best place to collect stories!’⁴ Lady Gregory’s Poets and Dreamers begins with her retelling of a conversation in Gort Workhouse between two women arguing about the worth of rival poets they had encountered in their childhood. Another chapter, ‘Workhouse Dreams’, is based on ‘three happy afternoons’ in a workhouse where she recorded a number of folktales, moved by the contrast ‘between the poverty of the tellers and the splendour of the tales’. Of the tellers she wrote:

> It seemed as if their lives had been so poor and rigid in circumstance that they did not fix their minds, as more prosperous people might do, on thoughts of customary pleasure. The stories that they love are of quite visionary things... I think it has always been so to such poor people, with little of wealth or comfort to keep their thoughts bound to the things about them, that dreams and visions have been given. It is from a deep narrow well the stars can be seen at noonday...⁵

Famine was reported in the West as late as the 1920s. In 1922 the Executive Council of the Irish Free State sent seed potatoes and other relief to affected districts but similar reports in 1925 were rejected as exaggerations. Tim P. O’Neill points out that behind these and similar reports in the preceding decades lay the reality of a section of the western poor living on the edge of starvation...⁶ All the Irish-speaking districts suffered from endemic emigration which threatened their viability in the most essential way. Ballinskelligs, Co. Kerry, where Séamus Ó Duilearga did much of his early field-work, had a population of 2,180 in 1841. By 1891, two years before the Gaelic League was founded, it had fallen to 1,550. In 1926, not long after the foundation of the Irish state, it was 923. In 1936, a year after the foundation of the Irish Folklore Commission, it was 796, and by 1971, the year after the commission was abolished, it had dropped to 452.⁷ Emigration did not directly affect old people, who by and large were the best folklorists’ informants. Emigration took away their loved ones, though remittances, on the other hand, often helped to keep whole communities afloat. It would be wrong to suggest that the problem did not concern the whole country;
Indeed almost all Irish families were affected by emigration – the proportion of Irish-born people living abroad was 43 per cent in the early 1920s. But emigration from the Gaeltacht, like that from the West in general, was particularly high, and its implications for the country which had rested its claim to independent nationhood on its Gaelic culture were particularly grave. Little wonder that folkloristic paens to illiteracy, the Middle Ages and traditional rural life seemed to some in particularly bad taste.

Various writers recognized the relationship between folklore and underdevelopment and understood that to ‘save’ folklore was to preserve underdevelopment. Indeed D.P. Moran explicitly made that observation in 1905. Sir William Wilde recognized that the creation of a modern society – ‘the spread of education, and the introduction of railroads, colleges, industrial and other educational schools’ – was one of the factors that was destroying traditional Irish agrarian society in the mid-nineteenth century. A similar observation was made by the anthropologist Roger Bastide about Europe in general and France in particular:

It is curious to note that Folklore became a science just at the moment when it began to disappear in the west, and to disappear exactly after the transformations in the economic structure. M. Varagnac went as far as demonstrating that it was not military service nor even the development of the road network which provoked, in 1860, the disappearance, relatively quickly, of French folklore – but the introduction of mechanization in agriculture. Development kills folklore or, more exactly, does not allow it to subsist except in certain sectors of the population, more and more reduced, such as children, or societies of those ‘natives of such and such a region’ in the big cities ...

But he also argues that misery killed folklore even faster than development since folklore depended on the existence of a folk community, ‘organized and structured, capable of maintaining a tradition through time and of extending itself, spiritually, through renovation, from one generation to the next’. But ‘where misery goes so far as to make the destiny of a man equal to that of a simple animal, hemming him into despair and passivity, there folklore will not exist’.

At the turn of the twentieth century, there were two notions of the Ireland of the future, one industrial and primarily associated with the nascent Sinn Féin party and the labour movement, the other agrarian, primarily associated with cultural revivalism and particularly with the Anglo-Irish writers of the literary renaissance. The latter view was most potently formulated by Yeats, for whom Ireland was the ideal place for the renewal of literature, being poor, uncorrupted by commercialism, and shaped by a history that had developed qualities of imagination and heroism in the people. Maurice Goldring argues that, unlike the Gaelic revivalists who saw themselves at the service of Irish-speaking communities whose voices they tried to make heard, Yeats, Lady Gregory and, to a lesser extent, Synge, ‘showed simply that they were capable of vibrating in harmony with the peasant world and its culture’. He holds that there was no dialogue there, just a fundamentally egotistic use by the writers of the poetic spectacle the peasant offered. ‘Misery for them was never poverty, and transformed itself into rich tapestries’. As has been memorably expressed in a Brazilian context, ‘Intellectuals are the ones who like misery; the poor prefer luxury’. Goldring grants that the engagement of a literary movement with the peasant way of life was neither new nor particularly Irish, but contends that, despite the great gulf between the ‘myth’ of a rural civilization and the social reality, the myth dominated not only literary life, but political and religious life in Ireland as well. He exemplifies that in the writings of figures as diverse as D.P. Moran, Michael Collins and J.E. (George Russell).

Reading the Blasket autobiographies, he argues that the picture they gave of rural life was very different. The islanders lived in closed and isolated communities, subject to a hostile environment and fearing the outside world. ‘Natural events, storms, bad weather, bad harvests, were neither more nor less explicable than famines, emigration, evictions, wars and uprisings’. Blessed ignorance or resigned acceptance, catastrophes come and go, caused by unknown powers, results of fate…’ He instances Tomás Ó Criomhthain’s resignation at the deaths of his family, understood as God’s will; the islanders’ view of a shipwreck as a blessing, since its cargo allowed them to feed themselves, and of war as good, since it brought them other such cargoes; and their rebellion never going beyond ‘brutal revolt’, such as pelting tax collectors with stones. He points out that in the autobiographies ‘the culture of these people only arrives at expression when it comes into contact with strangers’.

The attraction of such communities for the writers of the Irish literary renaissance, who felt themselves marginalized by the materialism of Europe, was the strength of the oral poetic tradition and the magical powers of poets and poetry. ‘In the rural society of the West of Ireland, they saw their ideal live, the image of Ireland that they wished to fashion: a rural society led by a new aristocracy, the aristocracy of the mind’. Goldring concludes that they engaged only with a small portion of the peasantry, that which was the most isolated and thus whose economic development was the most retarded. He makes the point that the social position of the writers, who were mostly landowners or related to landowners, explains ‘their repugnance at accepting the evolution of the rural world’. Because it did not accept change, the ‘myth’ did not engage with the peasants who organized themselves in the Land League (to the detriment of the interests of certain writers who were landowners). And it rejected the religion of the peasants, concentrating on their ‘paganism’ rather than on their Catholicism. The myth, then, could not function among the peasants themselves because it...
was fundamentally hostile to their interests. Instead, it worked among the urban intellectuals and middle classes, who were to direct the new state. Goldring points out that ruralist ideologies were particularly influential in countries that industrialized late, where the values of liberal capitalism had a slender base, where the middle classes defined themselves negatively against industry and the proletariat, were hostile to capitalism and to socialism, and where late entry into global economic competition, as in Ireland, led to a reactive defence of traditional values. Industrial progress then could be seen as a betrayal of traditional ideals.12

There was no strong alternative to nationalism on the Left. The rural proletariat had been in terminal decline since the Famine of the 1840s and the subsequent haemorrhage of emigration,* while the only significant industrial region, around Belfast, had an ethnically divided workforce. The Labour Party did not stand in the elections of 1918 in which Sinn Féin triumphed. During the War of Independence, Republican forces were used on occasion to quash land agitation, in response to which the Dáil Ministry of Home Affairs expressed the concern ‘that the mind of the people was being diverted from the struggle for freedom by a class war…’.13

De Valera’s vision of Ireland in the decades after forming his government in 1932 was favourable to the project of the folklorists. Gearóid Ó Cruaidhíoch has shown that this vision originated in Romanticism and in the ideals of Young Ireland and the Gaelic League. Referring to the mode of thinking which ‘sees the Irish peasant as really a type of aristocrat-in-disguise’, he argues that the ‘rhetorical denial of true “peasant” status to Irish rural society’ goes hand in hand with a tacit acquiescence in the use of a largely ‘peasant’ model for thinking about and managing social and economic development in the years of de Valera’s ascendency. The achievement of peasant proprietorship had little effect on the nature of rural society or the structures of agriculture while emigration safely released the excess population. Thus rural life seemed to have ‘lost’ a pattern that was unbroken since time immemorial, while a new metropolitan elite could, since the revolution, maintain a seemingly benign form of the old structural ascendency over the “liberated” countryside.14

Here was indeed a source of that “truly Irish” order of things that was so important a part of the national dream. Cleared of its Big Houses in reality or by selective vision – the hinterland of the essentially pre-industrial Irish market towns at the once the source of economic self-sufficiency, in all but a few instances where imported foreign luxuries were not to be decried, and also the heartland of moral and social values bearing testimony to the spirituality and selflessness of the Irish people.

* Figure cited by Caoimhín Ó Danachair are revealing. In 1841 there were 736,838 “cottier” labourers and 471,062 farmers. In 1911, the respective figures were 129,638 and 383,167 and in 1971, 35,669 and 181,627. Caoimhín Ó Danachair, ‘Cottier and Landlord in pre-Famine Ireland’ Rís na hÉireann, nos 48–9 (1980–1), pp. 164–5.

He contends that “the conception of a folk or peasant-type society” was central to de Valera’s (and Fianna Fáil’s) political philosophy from 1932 to 1969, making “it easier for both leader and party to get on with the “real” job of manifesting and reinforcing Irish sovereignty while leaving Irish society relatively unaltered.”15

The Englishman George Derwent Thomson (1903–1987) developed an interest in Ireland and Irish through his mother, whose father was Irish. Like many others, he was entranced by the small community of the Blasket Island, but he tried to understand it within its specific historical and social context. He first visited the Blasket in 1923—on Robin Flower’s recommendation—to learn Irish, and befriended a young Islander, Múiris Ó Súilleabháin, who became his teacher. He persuaded Ó Súilleabháin not to emigrate to America, but to join the newly formed Irish police force, and encouraged him to write a classic autobiographical account (see Chapter 5). A life-long Marxist and a brilliant classical scholar, Thomson felt that he had found the key to understanding the Homeric poems in the Blaskets, teaching him “what it is like in a pre-capitalist society”, where the traditions of the islanders, especially their poetry, date from a time when social relations were profoundly different from those in which I have been brought up.”16 He described the storyteller Pég Sayers as “a woman from the Middle Ages” whose mind was so taken with the traditional world that “she scarcely understood that it was disappearing”. Tomás Ó Cionnaith was also a man from the Middle Ages; he understood that the world was changing, “and not for the better”, writing his accounts so that the old world would be remembered.

Thomson argues that we should not lament the passing of that old world because of its terrible hardships, and asks whether poverty was the reason why it survived so long. A harsh nature, infertile land, small fishing boats, the paying of rent to landlords all made the islanders’ lives difficult. He points out that “unless there was a lot of wealth going to a few people, there would be no accumulation of money”, and that was the sine qua non of the industrial revolution: “as long as mechanized industry was being established in the cities, the poverty of the countryside was a historic necessity.”17 In the Middle Ages, Thomson recounts, international trade and the circulation of money declined, money falling out of circulation in many rural areas, such as the Irish-speaking parts of Ireland. Thus, to describe the life of the Blaskets as medieval was simply to say that it took no part in the great developments that have happened in Western Europe since the Middle Ages. The Blaskets had monetary connections with the outside world, paying rent to landlords, buying goods from shopkeepers in Dingle and receiving remittances from relations in America. But within the island, the only money that circulated was for dowries. Money did not influence the islanders’ relationships with one another since “[t]here was neither master nor servant among them”. They were bound to each other by
kinship and marriage ties, lived within a short distance of each other, 'every man of them a jack-of-all-trades, while they hunted and fished in co-operation...'. All strangers who visited were treated equally. 'They did not think any less of [a stranger] for being poor, nor think more of him for being rich', if they were to praise him, they described him as 'noble and humble (tasal agus feith)'.

The socio-economic processes which destroyed the Blanket community were doing the same all over the world, according to Thomson. Those who would control it were the 'the poor simple people in every country who are both backward and cultured as were the people of the Blaskets'. And when they would be in control, 'backwardness will be completely ended and civilization will leap ahead'. He tried to make his own contribution to that in Ireland. Concerned at the decline of Irish-speaking districts, he argued that they could only be saved by giving employment to their inhabitants. In Galway (where he taught Greek through Irish in the university from 1931 to 1934 and translated Greek works into Irish), he organized extramural lectures for Gaeltacht people on topics that concerned their culture and daily life, but received no support from the College authorities. He admitted many years later that his efforts to save 'the culture of the Irish-speaking peasantry' were unsuccessful because 'you cannot raise the cultural standards of a people without raising their economic standards...'.

Ironically, the Irish state was built on the symbolic values of a 'deep' Ireland located in the Gaelic western fringes but the physical struggle to achieve that state was won elsewhere. In the War of Independence the most active areas were neither the traditional agrarian west nor the rich eastern counties. Cavan and the province of Munster, excluding its most westerly and Irish-speaking county, Kerry, were the most active, in regions where farms were above subsistence level, towns were well developed and a stratum of strong farmers existed, as Tom Garvin shows. Munster was a core area, in contributions to the Gaelic League and in origins of the revolutionary leadership from 1900 to 1923. The Gaeltacht was an apical part of Ireland. The region most remote from Dublin and metropolitan culture, cultural elements survived there which had disappeared from other parts of the country: the Irish language, heroic tales and lays, timber-framed canvas-covered boats (currachal or noimhóg), traditional costume (as in the Aran Islands). The land was by and large extremely limited in potential use, a high proportion of it consisting of hills, mountains and bog.

Irish-speaking districts were characterized by subsistence farming and were incapable of sustaining a significant population of farm labourers. The idealization of a region with very limited social stratification as a model for the nation helped to elide the social divisions that were very clear elsewhere in the country.

Ó Cadhain's Critique of Folklore Studies

Another intellectual who appreciated the culture of the Gaeltacht but insisted on situating it within the contemporary social and political reality was Máirtín Ó Cadhain (1905–1970), the most important prose writer in Irish in the twentieth century. He was born into a family of storytellers in Connemara. 'I was squeezed from the world of folklore, a world that changed little in a thousand years'. Trained as a teacher in Dublin, qualifying in 1926, he was soon teaching at home in Connemara. In 1930, he was one of three teachers who, in response to the Department of Education's offer of a 10 per cent raise in recognition of the special status of the Gaeltacht, replied that the money should be given to the people of the Gaeltacht. Around the same time, he was active in groupings formed to further the interests of the Gaeltacht, Cumann na Gaeltachta, which campaigned to reclaim the lakes from the private ownership of landlords, and Muinitir na Gaeltachta, which lobbied the government to grant some of the rich lands acquired from landlords in Co. Meath to Gaeltacht people. This successful campaign led to the settlement of Irish-speakers from Connemara in Rathcarn.

Ó Cadhain was active in the Gaelic League and joined the Irish Republican Army 'to liberate my people, the rural poor'. His links with the IRA cost him his job in 1936, after which he moved to Dublin. There he wrote, organized and taught for the Gaelic League, was recruiting officer for the IRA and a member of its Army Council. Arrested in 1939, he was imprisoned for a brief period. In 1940, he gave the oration at a Republican funeral and was interned without trial until July 1944 in the Curragh. There he taught Irish, read (in many languages), wrote, translated the Red Flag and the Internationale into Irish and gave lectures on social philosophy, on the radical political thinker and land reformer James Fintan Lalor (1807–1849), on the socialist thinker and revolutionary James Connolly (1868–1916) 'and perhaps a little of Marx'. But in a debate he opposed the motion 'That communism is the only form of government that guarantees social justice', asserting that 'as a matter of fact Stalin is the world's greatest capitalist, and Russia – the first attempt at Communism – the greatest slave state of history!' After a number of casual and poorly paid labouring jobs, he secured a post as a translator in the civil service in 1947, representations having been made on his behalf to de Valera, pointing out the benefit to the cause of the Irish language. In 1956 he was appointed lecturer in Irish in Trinity College Dublin and became Professor of Irish there in 1969.

His political commitment, particularly to the language and to the Gaeltacht, was a constant in his life, and helps to explain his lack of sympathy with any sort of Gaelic and folkloristic scholasticism that offered nothing to Gaeltacht people. A lecture he gave in 1949, 'Why is literature in Irish not growing?' ('Tuige nach bhfuil Litríocht na Gaeilge ag Fáis?'), was a caustic
critique of scholars’ attitudes to the language and to the Gaeltacht.

The University, the Institute* and the Folklorists would love if there were nine or ten more dialects to be messing around with. They would be delighted if there were no one in the Gaeltacht able to write or read, or they were only able to read and write English. That would leave their sounds, their words, their grammar, their folklore as pure as is so dear to scholarship... The Irish language does not belong to cranks [cantaidir], nor to professors nor to the Gaeltacht. It belongs to the people [cine]. It is as the language of a people [teanga chine], and not as the language of professors or of a couple of remote districts that it is destined to live.²¹

As an eight-year old, he tried to write down a Fenian tale. He published a list of proverbs in the newspaper An Stoc in 1928. Among other folklore items, he published stories about saints collected from his father and mother in Béaloideas in 1930, and other collections in the same journal in 1933, 1935 and 1936. Indeed it was mostly folklore he published until 1938.²² Folklore had a great influence on his imagination, as in his description of a journey to the Soviet Union in 1969.

I went east to Kirghizia, a Soviet republic in central Asia... I was thinking of the folktales of my youth. This was the Eastern World. This was my journey to the end of the world’s end, going along under the belt of the jet! These horses each of which had the hammer and sickle on its haunches were the cavalry of the Emir of Bokhara, of the Golden Horde... They were also the slim brown steeds in the stories of my father and my grandfather...²³

He gave a perceptive and characteristically truculent lecture on folklore to Cumann na Scríbhneoiri (the Writers’ Club) in 1950, its publication causing a good deal of controversy.²⁴ It deserves to stand as an important text on Irish folklore, deliberately provocative as it is. In it he recounted how folklore was the only learning that most of his neighbours had and that he knew many long folktales and other traditional lore before he knew English; indeed his earliest memory was of listening to his grandfather telling stories to an old neighbour.

It was long after that I understood that my grandfather was an ‘active carrier of tradition’ and that the neighbour was only a ‘passive carrier’.

One day my grandfather was telling a story, a long story about ‘the twelve sons of a King and a Queen’. Suddenly the ‘passive carrier’ thought he would break out as an ‘active carrier’.

‘It was not like that at all’, he said, as he smiled in a satisfied way to himself, ‘indeed it was not. You are going astray... Wait a while now and I will tell you what the youngest son did...’

* The School of Celtic Studies in the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies (founded in 1940).

When the sons of valour are telling stories Let the sons of the hags be silent [Naítra a bhíoth cinn na gaisce ag anseacht staid/ Bóthl clann na gcoill- leach is sost a mbéal], said the ‘active carrier’, fidgeting on the stool.

His ironic use of von Sydow’s notions of ‘active’ and ‘passive carrier of tradition’ in English in the anecdote is indicative enough of an ironic stance towards folklore scholarship. Discussing what ‘folklore’ meant, he quoted the German folklorist Lutz Mackenssen’s advice to the folklorist ‘to go out among the people and live the life of the peasants in the country, the fishermen on the shore, and the workmen of the towns’, mischievously adding that Professor Ó Dúilearga was known to sweep the kitchen in Kerry (a reference to the latter’s account of the prelude to a storytelling evening in Seán Ó Conaill’s house).

Probably every country in the world has its societies and journals of folklore, but in Ireland that is not enough, he contended. Whatever culture goes with the Irish language, and the language itself, are completely under its sway. ‘To say it in another way, the cultivation of Irish is only a branch of folklore’. A biting passage refers to the Day of Judgement:

There will be many folktales and much folklore on that day, every ‘passive carrier of tradition’ will be an ‘active carrier’, and Indo-European Man [a reference to the philology of Celtiasts] will be giving a full account of himself. I am certain that there will be as many stories of gods and stories of men [an oiread déscédalacho agus dain cédalacho] as will kill any folklorist, but it is likely that only one Ediphone will be allowed. Is the only thing that the Gaels of the twentieth century will be able to put on that Ediphone, that they collected a couple of million pages of folklore?

He explained how he understood folklore, that it is ‘a constant thing’, that it is ‘is being born before our eyes here in Dublin, in London, in New York’, that new versions of old things are always appearing, that every urban trade has its own folklore. He excoriated the language movement’s preoccupation with ‘old’ traditions: ‘We are a people for whom every old thing is important – good or bad’.

There is no craft but an old craft. There is no learning but the learning of old unlearned people.²⁵ It was almost all folklore in An Lóchnain and in An Stoc. Hence, it is now said that they were the two best Irish newspapers ever. The importance of the Gaeltacht is not that Irish can be learnt there. Nor that Irish can sprout out from there to the rest of the country. Little chance. There ‘the old customs are practised’. It is there above all that folklore is. The Gaeltacht is only a branch of folklore.

Ó Cadhain questioned the usefulness of folklore again and again: ‘Despite [Wolfe] Tone not having any folklore he brought two fleets to Ireland’. He

* Ó Dúilearga had referred to Seán Ó Conaill as ‘one of the best-read men in the unwritten literature of the people whom I have ever known’ (see Chapter 6).
castigated folklorists ‘because of the smell of winding sheets and open graves: because of the “death”, “death hanging”, “death in the sky”, that is felt everywhere folklore and Gaelic learning are carried on’. He traced this constant lament for the expiring Gaelic culture through Ó Dúilleargá, Robin Flower, and Ernest Renan. As for Flower’s wistful comments on the departure of the fairies from the Blaskets, Ó Cadhain retorted that so much dust had been raised building roads and new houses in his own district in the previous twenty years that few fairies could be left, and that electricity would get rid of the remainder! He quoted a newspaper account of an exhausted Irish-speaking youth who barely spoke English found wandering in the English town of Wigan and exclaimed: ‘The end of the Middle Ages in Wigan, in South Boston, in the Bowery… Did these lamenters for the Middle Ages [de Muí na Míneáisc) ever open their small gentle mouths to advance this residue of the Middle Ages as a people?’. ‘That is the sin that is crying out to God: the Delargian lament [on t-aoladh dulaargail], the medieval dirge that is sucking every drop of hope from the people’. He argued that Connemara has changed more in his own time than in a thousand years. ‘The Middle Ages have gone forever… It is Ireland’s curse that not enough machinery is whirling around it…’

Many of the barbs in the lecture are directed at Ó Dúilleargá’s writings, and indeed folklorists in general are unjustly tarred by the Romantic-scouring brush he aims at him. Quoting Ó Dúilleargá’s editorial in the first issue of Béaloideas, in which he argued that any future Gaelic literature which was not rooted in Gaelic literature and folklore would be worthless, Ó Cadhain asked how people wrote literature elsewhere in Europe without folklore. He argued that the importance of folklore lay in preserving that of it which remained as a ‘live wire’, transmitting ‘the electricity of humanity through the complex of our mechanical lives’, and thus ‘active’ people such as AE and his like were more important than folklorists. He pointed out that everywhere in the Gaelic world, from the Hebrides to the Aran Islands, new verses were being composed, but that very little of these compositions got into print. ‘More than any other aspect of folklore, oral literature, this belongs completely to the people, and that is the secret of its perpetuity’. He found folklorists showing no interest in it. He admired the use that Yeats, Lady Gregory and Synge made of folklore. Of Yeats:

Folklorists do not treat today of the folklore collecting he and Gregory did, nor of the collections he printed. He went fluttering from them to the ancient tales of the gods until he felt intuitively the bond between the two kinds, until he composed tales of the gods himself. He went fluttering to India and China, to mysterious oratories, and occult knowledge, and hidden philosophies of the Middle Ages. But he always returned to the forgotten legends of Knockanrea, to the bankrupt leprechauns of Lissadell, to the ragged fairies of the Burren, to embroider them in poetry, to coax their ancient secrets from them.

What he appreciated was the imaginative and creative use made of folklore. Living on in Yeats’s art, it transcended the dead ‘logarithms, paradigms and glosses’ of the scholars.*

Gramsci, Hegemony and the Subaltern

Another intellectual who was ‘squeezed out’ of the world of folklore was the Sardinian Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937). Born into an impoverished family, he was a hunchback as the result of a childhood accident and as such the object of fear and persecution. His own background can help to explain the centrality he attached to the question of the impoverished South in Italian politics as well as the importance of understanding a backward, subordinate folk culture.* Gramsci’s interest in folklore can be traced to his background. His home district was ‘riddled with witch-craft, spell-casting and belief in the supernatural’.

The Gramsci children were reared to a knowledge of were-wolves, blood-sucking demons and other terrors of night-time. By day as well they learned the legendary Sarde landscape and its archaic tongue, from older relatives or the itinerant story-tellers who passed through Sorgono and Chilarza.

‘The first adult ambition’ of ‘Antonu Su Gobbu’ writes Tom Nairn, ‘before he became the Italian revolutionary, Antonio Gramsci, was to rediscover this fabulous world, and justify it through scholarship’. Nairn argues that he is the most important Western Marxist.

But it cannot be without some significance that he was also a product of the West’s most remote periphery, and of conditions which, half a century later, became fashionable to call ‘Third World’. No comparable western

* Ó Cadhain was not the first writer to criticize the work of the folklorists. In 1939 the poet Patrick Kavanagh (1904–1967) published an article in the Irish Times under the heading ‘Twenty-three tons of Accumulated Folklore – Is it of any Use?’

Folklore collecting like its modern sister, mass-observation is an attempt by sentimental science to do without the poets who are now starving to death. Not only is this stuff culturally useless, it is definitely harmful. Let Dr Delargy (sic) say what he may; his weighty collection is a rubbish heap that sooner or later will have to be destroyed. Supposing the money that is being spent – or should I say wasted? – on dead things was spent to keep cigarettes in the mouths of poets, there would be a hope that April might wake green beauty in Ireland’s thought…

Kavanagh, like Ó Cadhain, showed the artist’s disdain for the pedantry of the scholar, but also used the folk culture of his own background to enrich his writings. Ó Catháin and Uí Sheilgín, A Muithri Dhí Chaocháin, Láthairgi Feastaí, p. xxii.
intellectual came from such a background. He was a barbed gift of the
backwoods to the metropolis, and some aspects of his originality always
reflected this distance.26

In 1911, as the winner of a scholarship, he began his studies in
the University of Turin. He became an activist in the Italian Socialist Party
around 1913 and began writing journalism for a socialist newspaper from
1914. He was elected to the central committee of the newly founded Italian
Communist Party in 1921 while editor of Ordine Nuovo, one of the party
dailies. In 1921 he went to Moscow, and later to Vienna, to work for the
Comintern. Elected a deputy in the Italian Parliament in 1924, he returned to
Italy. Despite his parliamentary immunity, he was arrested in 1926 and
detained, first in prisons and, as his health deteriorated, in clinics. He was
released conditionally, to hospital, in 1934 and died there in 1937, a few days
after he was given unconditional release. From 1948 his Prison Notebooks
began to be published, in a definitive edition in 1975, and have since been
translated into many languages.27

Gramsci's writings on folklore, which he called by the borrowed word
(folklore) are scanty. In his own words, he sought 'a more cautious and
precise assessment of the forces acting in society', and the observations on
folklore may be seen as a contribution towards that. He called for a critical
analysis of popular culture because he argued that ideas could have the
weight of a material force. He was both critical of popular ideology and at
the same time felt solidarity with subaltern social classes. He wished to see
a new culture arise among the people, which would bridge the divide between
modern culture and folklore. In that sense folklore was incapable of bringing
that situation about and had to be superseded. One of the key elements of
his thought was the connection between the people and the intellectuals and
specifically their negative relationship in the Italian context. In letters to his
family he showed a deep interest in Sardinian dialect and folklore and often
asked specific questions about local usage.28

We have a fascinating account of the events that followed the sending of
a Sardinian brigade to crush the striking workers of Turin in 1917. The
socialists decided to circulate a leaflet among the soldiers asking them to
support the workers. Gramsci rejected the first three drafts of the leaflet, but
accepted the fourth with some changes. He advised against the use of the
words 'brothers' and 'class' because, for Sardinian peasants, Turin workers
were signori and not brothers, and a 'class' was only known from school. He
suggested referring to 'rich' and 'poor' because the 'rich' forced shepherds
and miners in Sardinia and workers in Turin to work.29 It was essential to
make the soldiers know this because their officers had told them that these
'signori' - the Turin workers - were striking and manning barricades to
betray the soldiers fighting at the front. They had to be informed that these
workers were striking because they had no bread and wanted an end to the
war, just what the shepherds and miners of Sardinia wanted. The leaflet, in
Italian and Sardinian (translated by Gramsci), was circulated in the
soldiers' barracks. Through Sardinian workers, contact was made with the
soldiers and at a meeting the latter were surprised to find a Sardinian
'professor' defending the workers. Many of these Sardinian soldiers returned
to Turin as workers after the war.30

For Gramsci the basic problem of hegemony was not how a new group
came to power, but how they came to be accepted, not just as rulers, but as
guides that most people looked up to, exercising a moral leadership. By
hegemony, Gramsci does not mean dominance as such, but rather the lead-
ership which a particular group, a social class or a part of it, exercises in
society through the winning of influence over other groups. Before gaining
state power, before which hegemony cannot be completely achieved, the
group must be able to give intellectual and moral leadership, and hegemony
rests primarily on that. A hegemonic group, in other words, is hegemonic
because it has gained the consent of other groups to its leadership of
society. It may use coercion as a last resort in order to maintain its domi-
nant position, though the more coercion there is, the less the hegemony. The
term subaltern is used to refer to the groups who are not hegemonic, and
means lacking in autonomy, being subject to the hegemony of another
group.31 The nature of hegemony presupposes that the ruling group in
society has taken account of the interests of the other groups. It has been
argued that the strongest element in hegemony is the ruling group's ability
to go beyond its own narrow and selfish interests. Its strategy is to ensure
that its own interests can become the interests of other groups as well so
that the whole of society, the whole nation, seems to share a common
purpose. In other words it 'universalizes' its own interests.

Hegemony can present itself as an interchange of services between differ-
ent social classes. Néstor García Canclini argues that if the people are not to
be seen as a submissive mass it must be admitted that their dependence is
due in part to the fact that some of their needs are able to be fulfilled through
hegemonic action. He gives the example of peasant and Indigenous
migrants to the cities of Latin America whose local culture (language,
customs and beliefs) does not help them to accommodate to urban life. From
mass culture they get the necessary information to function in the city. Thus
television, which in one way can be seen as an agent of hegemony, in
another way is a 'manual of urbanity', which 'indicates how to dress, eat and
express one's feelings in the city'.32

* Cf. the French law of 1849 on the press portrayed popular literature as dividing society
into two classes, the rich - represented as tyrants - and the poor - as victims - and thus
exciting envy and hatred. The first study of French popular literature was at the instigation
of the minister of the police. Paul Nisard's Histoire des livres populaires et de la littérature de
Hegemony is won through a politics of alliances with other groups, that must open up a national perspective to the whole of society. So a hegemonic class manages to combine a national perspective with its own class interests so as to achieve national leadership. This is what Gramsci means by the concept of ‘national-popular’. It does not refer to any specific cultural content. Creating a national-popular culture ‘would mean confronting and overcoming the same obstacles (dialects, folklore, local particularisms) as the formation of a national language’. It would not mean imposing the first term on the second in the series of oppositions he establishes in his writings between language and dialects, between philosophy and common sense (or folklore), between high culture and popular culture, intellectuals and people, party and masses. Rather it would mean ‘to construct an educative alliance between them’ since hegemony involves an educational relationship. What distinguishes the bourgeoisie from previous ruling classes is that it is not closed, unlike the aristocracy, to which entry was possible only by birth. Instead it represents itself as being in continuous expansion and capable of absorbing the entire society. Hegemony then has cultural, political and economic implications and is not to be understood simply as a particular dominant social class using the state for its own interests; indeed it can be said that ‘all domination is strengthened insofar as it ceases to be so by converting itself into hegemony’.

Gramsci sees two realms within the state, political society, which is the state apparatus of administration, law, services, and so forth, and civil society. This latter consists of all those organizations that are usually called private, from political parties, trade unions and the media to religious and cultural organizations. Civil society is crucial for the concept of hegemony. It is the voluntary sector of society, the realm of consent, whereas political society is that of coercion and intervention, most visible through the role of the police and armed forces. The modern state he defines as ‘hegemony armed by coercion’, and he dates it from around 1870, with the beginning of the organization of the masses into politics for the first time. The state needs the consent of the governed in order to function properly, but it educates that consent. The culture of the popular classes was of concern because ‘the constitution of a whole new social order around capital required a more or less continuous, if intermittent, process of re-education’.

In this sense the school has a positive educational function and the courts a repressive and negative educational function. He points out that the state has its own conception of life and the duty of spreading it ‘by educating the national masses’. Thus it ‘competes with and contradicts other implicit and explicit conceptions’, of which folklore is one, and it must be ‘overcome’. Referring to the proposition that folklore should be taught in teacher training schools, he insists that for the teacher to know folklore ‘means to know what other conceptions of the world and 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’. Indeed this has already been the case, folklore being ‘under systematic bombardment, from the elementary schools to... the chairs of agriculture’. Folklore should not be considered ‘an eccentricity, an oddity or a picturesque element’, but should be taken very seriously.

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 of 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.

Gramsci received permission to write in prison in January 1929 and began work on the first Notebook in February. The plan of work lists sixteen ‘principal arguments’, of which ‘The concept of folklore’ is the seventh. The key passage in which he defines folklore is complex, and deserves to be quoted in full.

Folklore should ... be studied as 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. (Hence the strict relationship between folklore and ‘common sense’, which is philosophical folklore.) This conception of the world is not elaborated and systematic because, by definition, the people (the sum total of the instrumental and subaltern classes of every form of society that has so far existed) cannot possess conceptions which are elaborated, systematic and politically organized and centralized in their albeit contradictory development. It is, rather, many-sided — not only because it includes different and juxtaposed elements, but also because it is stratified, from the more crude to the less crude — if, indeed, one should not speak of a confused agglomerate of fragments of all the conceptions of the world and of life that have succeeded one another in history. In fact, it is only in folklore that one finds surviving evidence, adulterated and mutilated, of the majority of these conceptions.

At first glance Gramsci’s references to folklore seem undoubtedly negative. Alberto Cricce has given a close reading of Gramsci’s text, which is the basis for the following discussion. First of all, Gramsci contextualizes folklore ‘in the framework of a nation and its culture’, but opposed to official conceptions of the world. As a conception of the world and life, it is characteristic of certain strata of society, namely the ‘people’, who may be understood as ‘all the subaltern and instrumental classes in every society
that has existed up to now’, and hence a heterogeneous group. Folklore must be understood as a reflection of the conditions of their cultural life. Cirese outlines Gramsci’s fundamental proposition in the following terms:

- Folkloric conception is to official
- as subaltern social class is to hegemonic
- as simple intellectual category is to cultured
- as unorganic combination is to organic
- as fragmentary internal organization is to unitary
- as implicit mode of expression is to explicit
- as debased content is to original
- as mechanical opposition is to intentional
- as passive conflict is to active.

This list of negative qualities, he argues, comes ‘by deduction from the very concept of “people”’ since, as Gramsci writes, the people . . . cannot possess elaborated and systematic conceptions which . . . are politically organized and centralized’. Cirese adds that ‘[e]laboration, systematicness and centralization are in fact expressions of hegemony (even if not only of hegemony), which is precisely what those classes which are still subaltern lack’.

He finds a certain tension here, but references to folklore in other of Gramsci’s writings moderate some of the above. Speaking of ‘popular morality’, Gramsci notes a particular tenacity in its conceptions, stronger and more effective than those of ‘official morality’. And they are not necessarily the ‘gesunkenes Kulturgut’ of the official culture which he elsewhere suggests. Indeed he speaks of

that mass of beliefs and opinions on the subject of one’s “own” rights which are in continual circulation amongst the popular masses, and are for ever being reviewed under the pressure of the real conditions of life and the spontaneous comparison between the ways in which the various classes live.

Some, ‘the fossilized reflections of the conditions of days gone by’, are conservative and reactionary, but others consist of

- often creative and progressive innovations, spontaneously determined by
- the forms and conditions of life as it is developing, which go against, or
- merely differ from, the morality of the ruling strata of society.

This points to the oppositional value of folklore, and, as Cirese says, ‘the way is opened to a recognition of its ability both to produce its own autonomous culture and to select products handed down from above for its own, opposing, ends’. Hence folklore can provide a spontaneous form of ‘the spirit of cleavage’, which Gramsci elsewhere defines as the progressive acquisition of a class instinct. Gramsci tends to establish ‘a constant relationship between cultural phenomena and the social groups by which they are conveyed’. His notion of spontaneous conceptions of the world is backed up again and again by reference to concrete social situations.

Thus he points out that everyone is automatically involved in a social group or groups, and that ‘in acquiring one’s conception of the world one always belongs to a particular grouping which is that of all the social elements which share the same mode of thinking and acting’. This grouping may consist only of dispersed and isolated individuals or a concrete social group: one’s village, for example. The conception of the world that is dominant there may be heterogeneous in origin, but is born from a cultural activity which is socially internal to the group. He notes ‘the frequent affirmation made by Marx on the “solidity of popular beliefs” as a necessary element of a specific situation’, and compares them to ‘material forces’. What he calls ‘spontaneous philosophy’, or ‘common or popular philosophy’, he sees as being proper to everyone. It is in language and in folklore since ‘even in the slightest manifestation of any intellectual activity whatever . . . there is contained a specific conception of the world’.

The observations on folklore are few in Gramsci’s writings, but much of his work has implications for popular culture in general. Hegemony is the key concept, so that hegemonic culture and subaltern cultures are inescapable notions in studying culture within the state. The notion of subaltern denies the autonomy of the ‘folk’, thus standing firmly against the Romantic notion, and sees it as the product of a historical process, firmly within the framework of the state and in an unavoidable relationship with a hegemonic culture. And folklore cannot be understood outside of this context. The notion of the subaltern, too, is larger than the folk, because the Romantic notion referred to the peasantry only. Folklore, then, in Gramsci’s formulation, is part of the culture of subaltern groups. They may be very different from one another, and their culture is very heterogeneous in origin, consisting of elements generated from within the group as well as elements borrowed from hegemonic groups, but what all these groups have in common is that they do not exercise hegemony. Thus the ‘popular’ does not reside in any inherent quality: it is a question of position.

Gramsci’s work has influenced many scholars working on folklore and popular culture. In particular we mention Ernesto de Martino, Alberto Cirese and Luigi M. Lombardi Satriani. Lombardi Satriani has defined folklore as part of a mental heritage that is stable, collective and specific to the underprivileged, and ‘hence culturally subaltern’, classes of a society. In folklore, he identifies four levels of challenge to the dominant culture. The first is immediate challenge with implicit or explicit rebellion against the status quo: here he gives the example of folk songs which make a clear opposition, pre-political though it may be, between rich and poor, lords and commons, strong and weak. The second is immediate challenge with implicit or explicit acceptance of the status quo: here he finds a text, for example, where the
division between rich and poor is pointed out, but it leads back to God and the inevitability of poverty. The third is implicit challenge ('or by position'); here are phenomena—such as beliefs, practices and artefacts—which, by their otherness and their very presence, are an implicit opposition to the dominant order. In the last level, acceptance of the hegemonic culture, he finds three categories. The first are hegemonic cultural phenomena shared with popular culture—examples being the oppression of women or the notion that authority is necessary. The second are products of the hegemonic culture successively passed on to popular culture—such as some of the peasant material culture of the South of Italy which derives from that of the bourgeoisie at the end of the nineteenth century. The third are products of the hegemonic culture elaborated for and imposed on popular culture. He finds here a huge field since it includes much of the products of industrial society, such as popular prints, clothing and furniture. He also identifies various themes in folklore which fulfill 'anaesthetizing functions' (funzione narcotizzante): the necessity of contending oneself with one's lot; the need to have patience; fatalism; the necessity of authority; ignorance being better than knowledge; the merits of being attached to one's own district. He gives various examples from Italian folklore.

Garcia Canclini finds Lombardi Satriani's analysis too extreme, arguing that "anaesthetizing" or "challenging" qualities are too easily attributed to cultural phenomena that are neither one nor the other, but a combination of experiences and representations whose ambiguities correspond to the unresolved nature of contradictions among popular sectors. He contends that Lombardi Satriani treats domination and challenge 'as if we are dealing with two phenomena foreign to each other, whose existence came before both cultures became part of a single social system'. His point, argued elsewhere, is that the key issue is not whether folklore survives, disappears or is dominated by the hegemonic culture, but how it interacts with it. As an example he argues that often, the only alternatives created by the subaltern sectors are magical techniques, through which they try to control 'risk' and domination. Since socio-economic backwardness, hunger, unemployment, the lack of medical assistance, etc., make them live in 'permanent risk', popular groups tend to dehistorize reality in order to exorcize risk.

He points to the popular need 'to hold history, to repeat security even though this creates a process of exploitation and domination'. Hence 'the overcoming of the most critical situations (serious illnesses, death, catastrophes, etc.) is obtained through the dehistorization of their processes', through the use of magical techniques. He refers to De Martino's observation that the continuity of subaltern traditions can perpetuate domination. Paulo Freire in Brazil came to similar conclusions about subaltern groups and their 'quasi-adherence' to objective reality. If the explanation for adversity 'lies in a superior power, or in men's own "natural" incapacity, it is obvious that their action will not be orientated towards transforming reality, but towards those superior beings responsible for the problematical situation, or towards that presumed incapacity'. The response, therefore, will be magico-religious.

Research on the folktales (Märchen) has considered many of these issues. As an art form its origins are very ancient. The common people always cultivated it. In it they expressed the manner in which they understood the social order as well as their needs and aspirations, 'either affirming the dominant social values and norms or revealing the necessity to change them'. In this way, the folktales adapted to changes in the social order. When written down in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it still retained many archaic features but by and large reflected late feudal conditions. Jack Zipes argues that the folktales recorded by the Grimm brothers deal with 'exploitation, hunger and injustice familiar to the lower classes in pre-capitalist societies'. The magic in the stories reflects their wish to change the world. Looking at a number of the Grimms' tales, he finds the initial situation characterized by its apparent hopelessness. This hopelessness derives from the objective social circumstances of the agrarian lower classes. They were isolated in their work and in their abode and able to resist growing exploitation only imaginatively, through the utopian solution of the folktales.

As pre-capitalist art form, the folk tale presents, in its partiality for everything metallic and mineral, a set and solid, imperishable world. This imperishable world can be linked to concepts of medieval patriarchalism, monarchy and absolutism. The world of the folk tale is inhabited largely by kings, queens, princes, princesses, soldiers, peasants, animals and supernatural creatures, rarely by members of the bourgeoisie. Nor are there machines nor signs of industrialization. In other words, the main characters and concerns of a monarchistic and feudal society are presented, and the focus is on class struggle and competition for power among the aristocrats themselves and between the peasantry and aristocracy. Hence the central theme of all folk tales: 'might makes right'. There is no mention of another world. Only one side of characters and living conditions is described. Everything is confined to a realm without morals, where class and power determine social relations. Hence, the magic and miraculous serve to nurture the feudal confines and represent metaphorically the conscious and unconscious desires of the lower classes.

It is not difficult to see why the folktales should continue to be a living art form in those regions in which market relations and literacy were weakest. We know from the historical evidence that it was not these regions that were to the forefront of political struggles. Those who lived in the world of folklore were least able to confront the objective political and socioeconomic conditions that repressed them. On the other hand, the short humorous tales (Schwank-Märchen) of the urban working classes at the
Popular Culture between Populism and ‘Miserabilism’

The exclusion of sections of the population from full participation in national life, through poverty, unemployment, homelessness, emigration and illiteracy troubled George Thomson, and others. Ó Cadhain was aware of the official idealization of the Gaeltacht on the one hand and the official inability to do anything significant about its socio-economic problems on the other. He saw only too well the similarity between folklore and populism. The opposing perspectives of Séamus Ó Duilearga and Ó Cadhain reveal a fault line in the approach to popular culture which has appeared almost everywhere that an interest in the popular has been cultivated. Claude Grignon and Jean-Claude Passeron see the debate on popular culture departing from a ‘class ethnocentrism’, which is ‘a spontaneous practice of description which precedes every scientific enterprise of analysing a society or a culture’. The first break with this attitude is towards cultural relativism. This ‘credits popular cultures with the right to have their own meaning’ but, in contradistinction to the study of distant or past cultures, it has to artificially attribute autonomy to them, since ‘it must ... treat dominated cultures as if they were not so’. The second break questions this autonomy and refuses to ignore the relationships of force and the unequal interaction between the social classes of the same society which are part of a ‘legitimate cultural order’ in a class society. The debate, thus, oscillates between a populism based on the autonomy of popular culture and a ‘miserabilisme’ which sees popular culture as inescapably slotted into a legitimate social order. Where ‘the populist marvels at discovering the symbolic treasures in a popular culture ... the bourgeois like the miserabiliste sees only penury’.

Renato Ortiz sees the two poles of the debate in similar terms. If popular is considered synonymous with the people, then there is an ‘intimate association between popular culture and the national question ...’ that transcends ‘the restrictive inflection of class’, which is the other way of seeing the popular. This latter perspective contrasts popular culture with that of the elite and attributes to its concrete manifestations the potential to construct a new society. Antonio Augusto Arantes sees the two perspectives in terms of a denial that popular forms contain any kind of knowledge on the one hand and an assertion of the role of popular culture in resisting class domination on the other.

The first perspective refers in general to aspects of technology (work techniques, healing procedures, etc.) and of ‘knowledge’ of the universe, while the second emphasizes artistic forms of expression (oral literature, music, theatre, etc.); the one tends to think in terms of events in the past, as something which was or soon will be replaced; and the other thinks of them in the future, glimpsing in them the signs of a new social order ...

This is a form of the distinction between a more prosaic ‘folklore’ and a more poetic, and symbolically richer, ‘folklore’.

García Canclini calls the proponents of the two approaches the ‘inductivists and the deductivists. He places their origins in different disciplinary and ideological positions: the inductivist in culturalist North American anthropology and in populism, the deductivist in sociology, communications studies and education and with a strong Marxist flavour. The inductivists’ point of departure is the intrinsic nature of those properties supposedly pertaining to the popular classes, their genius, the creativity that other sectors have lost, their resistance. The deductivists define popular culture ‘from the general to the particular’, in terms of mode of production, dominant class, ideological apparatus, imperialism, and so forth. He argues that, from the 1960s and 1970s, many writers have analysed popular culture in terms of ‘manoeuvres of domination’, and have attributed to social agents such as the media a monopoly of power, and have over-estimated the influence of the dominant sectors on popular culture. He points out that for decades folklore and anthropology were the only disciplines dedicated to the study of the popular and, because of their restricted object of study, they identified it with the traditional, the peasant or the indigenous. Their studies, very sensitive to the specificity of every group, tend to mark the difference without explaining the inequality which confronts them and links them to other sectors. They intend to dissipate the distances between unequal cultures with the doctrine of cultural relativism, affirming that all are valuable in their own way.

Referring to Latin America, he contends that this ‘relativist pseudo-egalitarianism’ was used in indigenous politics, which, ostensibly preserving the traditions of indigenous groups, in reality institutionalized their marginalization. He argues that folklore goes further than anthropology in its ‘traditionalism’:

Not only does it limit the popular to peasant and indigenous manifestations, but it also reduces research – except in Gramscian writers and in a few others – to the collection of objects and the description of their formal values. Therefore the majority of the texts on craftsmanship, festivals and traditional music catalogue and exalt popular products without situating them in the logic present in social relations. They limit themselves ... to listing and classifying those pieces ... which stand out by their resistance or indifference to change.

This conception of the popular has been influential in universities, state institutions such as museums and in the mass media. It appears in folk
7. From Folklore to Popular Culture ... and Beyond?

The concept of folklore came to terms with the social conditions that were irrevocably transforming it with difficulty. Associated with a mode of existence radically different from that of the city, it seemed to imply more than isolation and backwardness; it also implied independence. 'Oral' and 'traditional', it was implicitly or explicitly opposed to the world of reading and writing. But in fact the growing proximity to each other of the 'oral' and the 'literary' is a feature of the development of all modern societies. A stratum of popular culture that has its origins in learned culture has existed in Europe for centuries. It can be traced to classical or Biblical sources and to medieval and early modern science, literature and theology. The three great religions long established in Europe rest on scriptures and the mediation of literate groups.

From the city Christianity had spread out to the recalcitrant countryside (pagus in Latin, whence paganus, a pagan). The influences on popular culture from outside greatly increased with the rise of capitalism, industrial society and the growth of literacy. It was in this context that the notion of 'folklore' appeared, retreating before the commercialization and mechanization of agriculture, the centrifugal force of the industrial cities, the building of roads and railways, the extension of education. A 'literature of conflation' had long inventoried popular errors, but increased literacy made new 'errors' accessible to the people, as a market reached through the medium of a popular literature, and hence a new cause for official concern. Literacy meant the ability to read the Bible, but also The Rights of Man and chapbook fiction.

The decline of the peasantry in industrial capitalism motivated folklore studies during the nineteenth century. The intensification of that in the second half of the twentieth century* without a doubt problematized the field of folklore studies, but in the same way the growth of a tertiary sector

* The following figures are for agrarian employment as a percentage of the economically active population in select countries c. 1950 and on the eve of the Second World War (in brackets): Belgium 2 per cent (17 per cent); France 5 per cent (36 per cent); Germany