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Folklore and Fascism

By T. M. PEARCE

WHEN Lewis Browne, author of *This Believing World*, spoke in Albuquerque in the spring of 1936, he called modern folklore movements the work of poets and dreamers; he said that such movements added picturesqueness and preserved tourist values, but were sentimental and romantic attitudes. The forces of standardization are too great, he said; the Russians no longer wear their long coats and the characteristic hats but search the second hand shops for cheap American hats. Browne quoted someone's smart phrase when he explained that in a folk culture the sin was mental incest because the mind reproduced itself on the past, whereas a civilization like our own polyglot mixture committed mental adultery. Folk movements, in his judgment, were either idle but amusing pastimes or definitely regressive social tendencies and one accompaniment to fascism.

It was the first linking of the two activities I had ever heard—folklore and fascism. It set me thinking. I supposed he had in mind Die Fuehrer Hitler's conjuring with the racial Aryan folk myth or other out-croppings of myth about a "chosen people" familiar to Mr. Browne, when they work hardship on minorities under their control.

I couldn't see any connection with ordinary folklore societies and their innocent but valuable interest in anecdote and ballads and vocabulary of unusual peoples free from standardized contemporary culture. Then a peculiar light dawned while I was at work on a book about Mary Austin. Mrs. Austin, in her book *Everyman's Genius*, distinguishes between what she calls the "deep self" of an individual and his "immediate self." Mrs. Austin's terms are sometimes a little obscure, but what she has in mind here is definite. The first or deep self she calls the repository in each of us

of racial experience; the second or immediate self she calls the repository of our psychic experience from birth or before birth as sense consciousness develops. She believed that genius flows in everyone as, below the chance recognition of our talents and their haphazard training, there flows the experience of the race, a deep bosomed stream which surges upward when we find the means of giving it release.

As folklorists, when we look back at older records of the group life we belong to, or at arrested stages of this folk life in the contemporary scene, aren't we searching for the racial pattern, identifying ourselves with the deep stream of racial experience rather than with our own immediate activities, except as the folklore hunt may be an interlude in what we normally do? We don't consider *ourselves* folklore! That is, our immediate selves! We hunt out other groups as they may explain our ancestral pattern or the ancestral way of some other folk.

It is partly curiosity with us, partly literary and artistic interest. We like the strangeness, the dash, and color of unusual expressions. When Mary Austin went into the California desert and began to know Indians she realized that she was in the Stone Age. She says, "If a remnant of Europe's stone age were discovered, say in the Pyrenees, they would all go there, ex-economists and social philosophers alike, with note-books and acute curiosity. But I was there, in California, U. S. A., and nobody even wanted to hear about it. Eighteen years I followed that trail with avidity, saw institutionalized marriage rise out of natural monogamous mating; the rise of capital, not out of greed and oppression, but out of the tendency of goods to accumulate around dominant personalities. Watched development of the city-state, and the inevitable evolution of republicanism into communism, and saw communism die of its own inhibitions."¹

Here was a folklorist among the Indians, watching them as a small laboratory of social experiment. They were

1. "How I Found the Thing Worth Waiting For," *Survey*, 61:434. January, 1929.

a long seminar for Mary Austin in American culture, and what she saw of them, with an under-writing of her interpretations of what she didn't see, she tried to fit in to American life as the American way. The Indian concept of community life and responsibility, community allocations of land and water, community festival, and dance, the matriarchal right to property in the house and domestic goods, the male role in religion and poetry—these were good models for us—good medicine for the American tribe.

Isn't Herr Hitler trying to find good medicine for the German tribe when he pronounces "Often men come from other countries to ask for my 'recipe,' but I tell them I have no recipe, because my movement is distinctly adapted to the German people. . . . There are certain basic ideas which, I believe, are penetrating beyond Italy and beyond Germany . . . The basic idea which I think will spread is that of what I choose to call authoritative government, uninfluenced by the fluctuation of parliamentary whims . . . For us in Germany, especially, parliamentary democracy is a foreign body. It is not native to us, and does not belong to our tradition. The system has failed here:"²

Here is the new folk symbol: Herr Siegfried Hitler in search of the Rhine gold if not the Rhine maidens; the Die Fuehrer Lohengrin guided by an Aryan swan. In the invocation of a folk destiny, he condones the most unmitigated inhumanity.

And Signor Mussolini, what a master he is of folklore as, standing beneath the Arch of Constantine, he glorifies the "thousands-of-years-old civilizing mission of Italy" in Africa and reviews troops "guided by the sign of the Lictors' Rods," and christens boys "Sons of the Wolf."

Thurman W. Arnold has recently given us a book called *The Folklore of Capitalism* where we find patterns for economics and industry as much of the deep stream of social action as any racial prejudice or expression of temperament in song and dance. The mythology of American Big Busi-

2. Associated Press, Berlin, February 3, 1933.

ness is the theme of Mr. Arnold; he speaks of the folklore of 1937 in the literature of law and economics and the fight over the Supreme Court. Here is a spread of the folklorist search for culture patterns from archaeology and literature and music to money and investment and the stock exchange. In the case of Mr. Arnold, the analysis he makes of economic myths is an antidote to fascism and conservative pattern thinking rather than an aid to it.

So it can be with other folklorists. If folklore can provide the patterns of the fascist, it can also provide the patterns of other traditions.

"I had a pattern hungry mind" said Mary Austin in her autobiography.³ Doesn't every folklorist? Didn't the folklorist Plato, when he sought for the perfect Ideas or Forms of thought and behavior? These patterns of our civilization need not be static forms; they can't be in a world of constant change. And the scientific or honest folklorist's world isn't static. No one knows better the variety of patterns than one who works in folklore. Nor, I think, is there a group more tolerant of variety in expression than folklorists, honest ones. Hitler doesn't express the true folklorist, nor Mussolini. They simply employ a narrow direction of folk interpretation to their particular ends, yet one can meet them at their own practice.

Fray Benavides wrote of New Mexico in 1630: "This has always been a people of government and a republic; the old men coming together with the chief captain to confer and judge the things that were suitable. And when these had been determined, the *capitan mayor* went forth in person proclaiming through the pueblo that which was ordered. And this is, even today, an action of great authority, this proclaiming by the chief captains what has to be done in the pueblo." How modern for America it sounds, this Indian folklore: "the old men coming together with the chief captain to confer and judge the things that were suitable. And when these had been determined, Franklin D. Roosevelt

3. *Earth Horizon*, 349.

spoke in a fireside chat proclaiming through the pueblo that which was ordered . . . ”

We have our precedents for democracy in the lore of the Amerind folk on this continent. But they run also in the Anglo-Saxon blood stream, the racial self which we can instruct and tap, as Mary Austin believes, by a ritual of suggestion. Aren't we practicing auto-suggestion when we recite a pledge to Americanism or the Constitution? Don't we do something like that to the "American deep self," when we hold patriotic meetings, sing the national anthem, try to build a national consciousness? ✓

If Mary Austin had been a witch, she would have bewitched the progress of Boulder Dam, for she opposed the disposal of so much power and water, the rightful property of the Upper Basin States, to Los Angeles, the city which had already robbed Owens Valley of the Owens River and left the orchards of Inyo, Bishop, and Lone Pine to the mercy of wind and sun. Mary Austin was conjuring with a myth that nature takes its revenge on the hand that mistreats it. She was arguing from her conviction that people take their character from the land they live on, that the true self of America lies in the character of its land and that its people will be blessed by fruitfulness and harmony when they heed the signs of nature, and cursed by erosion, drouth, and want when they rob or abuse nature's resources. Of Germany she predicted such a course as Hitlerism; her prophecy was made in 1918, seven years before Hitler's rise to power. In a book called *The Young Woman Citizen* she said: "The whole principle of nationalization among Germans has been a denial of the mother-right of the land. It is an attempt to found states on the male principle only, to oppose the natural modification of lands and peoples they happen to live among, and remain determinedly German Germans . . . Germany may become a democracy, but if her people continue to resist the modifications of environment in favor of a Teutonic ideal of life, she would be quite as much a menace to the world. . . It is probable that we made

too much of the imperialistic form of government in Germany. Without a Kaiser, and with this primitive maleness of mind unaltered, we could not see Germans going into any country in large numbers without knowing that it would mean death to whatever contribution to civilization we have a right to expect from that soil."⁴

Who would not exchange Hitler for the Kaiser? Concentration camps were unknown in the Kaiser's day. The Kaiser was a family man who used the firing squad for executions and not the chopping block. It may have been Mary Austin's famous psychic hunch rather than reasoning from culture patterns, but she gave a good folklorist's prediction when she forecast troubles for German democracy.

If folklorists are invoking the soul of the race, the deep self of our racial stream, what patterns that are best do we call up in the Southwest?

From the individual Indian—his sense of community loyalty and group spirit and responsibility for the general welfare.

From the individual Spaniard his grace and courtesy of manner and his hardihood in adversity.

From the Anglo-American—his aggressiveness in both physical and intellectual spheres and his capacity for investigation and organization of nature and human experience.

Of social patterns, what have we from the racial streams?

From Amerind Society—a reverence for nature and a planned economy.

From Hispanic Society—loyalty to personal leaders and fine values in family life.

From Anglo-American Society—industry in enlarging the resources of material living and an evolving sense of social justice.

Mary Austin asks the question, after reading Waldo Frank's *Our America*, "Isn't an Indian as authentic an interpreter of Americanism as a Jew? Would there be a

4. *The Young Woman Citizen*, 156. The Woman's Press, New York, 1918.

difference in the emphasis upon values? Wouldn't the deep stream of race here make its mark?"⁵ I think the answer is "Yes." Yet we cannot avoid patterns, the patterns of the immediate self and the patterns of the deep self, the life activity pattern and the deep-set tradition patterns. But with a mixed people we have to put them together, and some elements of the many designs must run through the whole to bind it to a unity, a community.

Lewis Browne is as much a folklorist as anyone, for he is engrossed in culture patterns, as his books show; but he seems today to be riding the crest of the progress wave as it rolls toward some unseen shore. Behind the outer wave lies the great stream of the human race, its substance the labor, struggle, pathos, humor, and wisdom of the masses of men. Two groups of folklorists are at work upon it, engineering its torrential power. One consists of the stream-lined brittle minds at play with the standardized little tools of international aggression and class war; the other consists of constructive minds employed upon the creative materials in any great national tradition.

If any control of mass mind and mass prejudice can be exercised, it will begin deeper in the stream than the outer wave which rolls on a head of the place in front of it and oblivious of the water behind. Folklorists are deeper in the stream than Lewis Browne at the moment, and for better or worse will do more to direct the currents of our time. The author of *This Believing World* can see that folk dreams and folk sentiment are not so unrealistic when employed by a Hitler or a Mussolini. He should see, too, that good medicine can result from a folklore of human values and social democracy.

5. "New York Dictator of American Criticism," *The Nation*, 111, 129. July 31, 1920.