

Joseph Grim Feinberg, *The Paradox of Authenticity: Folklore Performance in Post-Communist Slovakia* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2018), 256 p. ISBN 9780299316600.

In *The Paradox of Authenticity: Folklore Performance in Post-Communist Slovakia*, Joseph Grim Feinberg offers a rich ethnographic study of contemporary Slovak folklore ensembles, which he uses to explore discourses of authenticity and the process of authentication. While the book undertakes an important intervention in debates within ethnography and folklore studies, it also pursues wider questions that will be of concern to scholars of Eastern Europe more broadly. Key among these concerns include the changing relationship between aesthetics, politics, and society in the transition from communism to liberal capitalism and the place of “the people” in the contemporary post-popular age. While Feinberg’s observations regarding the ways in which contemporary folklore groups in Slovakia navigate the paradoxes of authenticity are perceptive and stimulating, his final call for a “repoliticization” of folklore warrants careful attention.

The authentic folklore movement in music and dance emerged in Slovakia in the final years of the 1990s. Its founding activists set out to distance themselves from what they perceived as the kitsch folkloric ensembles that had been promoted by official institutions under communism. For this new generation of folklore activists, communist folklorism had corrupted a more authentic folklore by overly stylizing it, standardizing and homogenizing different regional traditions into a single national culture and imposing on it a political ideology. The authentic folklore movement sought a radically different practice, removing traditional dance and music from the control of these official institutions and “returning folklore to the people.” To this end, its advocates undertook a rigorous collection, archiving, and study of distinct regional traditions of folk music and dance. This archive, in turn, served to reorient folklore away from the stylized, theatrical performances of large ensembles and towards a folklore done “for pleasure.” The new archives were harvested to reconstruct fundamental aesthetic structures or techniques that could in turn inform individual improvisation, allowing individual dancers to more “authentically” express themselves.

It is authentic folklore’s concern – even obsession – with authenticity that forms the core of Feinberg’s study. What, he asks, do practitioners of this movement mean by an “authentic” folklore? What does this concern with authenticity tell us about the relationship between aesthetics and modern society? And how do ideas of authenticity reconfigure notions of “the folk” or “the people” in the era of post-communism, in which

such concepts are considered outdated or dangerous? Building on the work of Lionel Trilling, Feinberg concludes that authenticity is a distinct problem of the modern subject and therefore must be understood as an existential condition that arises from the real contradictions of modernity. "The idea of folklore," in this sense, "is an expression of the peculiarly modern desire for this more authentic life". (24)

Under communism, the redemptive character of folklore was understood within an epic Hegelian narrative of history: according to official ideology, as socialism developed "modern society itself would become coterminous with the folk" and therefore folklore could "continually develop as an art that is at once authentic, modern, and popular." (49) But in the aftermath of the revolutions of 1989, suspicion of such grand historical narratives recast utopian thinking as dangerous and totalitarian. As the very concept of "the people" was denuded of its political significance, the place of folklore was also thrown into question: what, after all, is folklore's role in a world without a folk? Authentic folklore's answer to this question was to reject the utopian horizons of Hegelian dialectics and to seek, not a resolution to the contradictions of modernity, but merely brief, temporary moments of transcendence. (177)

For Feinberg, this self-limiting nature of authentic folklore is in harmony with the wider depoliticization of "the people" in post-communist societies. As liberal and technocratic norms gained hegemony in the aftermath of communism, increasingly "the people" was displaced as the object of politics in favor of a more fragmented, anonymous "public." (35) With the marginalization of the people as the ontological grounding of politics, folklore also became unmoored from its own ground in the folk. The authentic folklore movement has sought to negotiate this tension by presenting itself as a mediator between an inauthentic public and an authentic-but-inaccessible folk. Authentic folklore doesn't claim to represent the people, but rather "points to a people that exists somewhere else. The movement does not play the part of a savior promising redemption, but of a devotee who points the way for other devotees, who can approach their object through the proper rites of devotion." (186) In the process, of course, the people is further depoliticized. Importantly, Feinberg notes, this depoliticization has allowed authentic folklore to maintain a distance from right-wing nationalist discourses. At the same time, however, it has preserved an implicit notion of the folk that always lies ready to be activated by reactionary political forces.

Aesthetically, the depoliticization of the people has prompted a move away from the epic lyricism promoted by communist folklore, towards a tragic lyricism of the post-communist age. If communism understood folklore through the framework of Hegelian dialectics and anticipated a future unity of the authentic folk and modern society, authentic folklore is better understood as embodying the Kierkegaardian figure of the "knight of faith." (29) While maintaining fidelity towards an imagined premodern world of the authentic folk, the movement simultaneously acknowledges the hopelessness of its striving. (197) The aesthetic product of this philosophy, Feinberg concludes, is a "lyricism [...] adapted to an age of social inertia." (174)

The tragic lyricism of authentic folklore offers a potentially valuable starting point for reconceiving the problem of authenticity. Authentic folklore, Feinberg argues, reproduces a tension between two models of authenticity. The first, an unreflective model, considers authenticity to lie in the essence of things-in-themselves. Authentic folklore here exists as an object of a premodern epoch whose essence can only be briefly glimpsed by modern devotees. The second, a reflective model, considers authenticity as a Sartrean process of self-realization, in which a consciousness creates its own essence. While authentic folklore would appear to practice the first, unreflective model, Feinberg notes that its acknowledgement of the futility of its efforts to grasp the authentic thing-in-itself provides an opening to a more reflective account of authenticity: "Might we modern beings give up on the belief that folklore is hidden somewhere else and instead come to the belief that folklore simply is this striving for the authentic in a world where the past, as past, is gone?" (197) Folklore, in other words, should be conceived as the striving of a collective historical subject to authentically realize itself in the modern world.

Such a self-reflective, authentic folklore, Feinberg argues, could begin to challenge the conditions of modernity that give rise to inauthenticity. If the people is understood not as a vanishing object of the premodern world, but as a collective historical subject capable of an authentic self-transformation, then folklore can also begin to adopt an active, transformative role in modern society. (199) To this end Feinberg calls for a repoliticization of folklore and gestures towards a "radical" folklore that could compete with both the tragic depoliticization of the authentic folklore movement and the threat of a rising reactionary nationalism. This radical folklore would draw on a folkloric tradition of "playfully pushing against existing hierarchies from the position of what is 'low' and excluded from the prestigious centers of culture and art." (200) It would be, in short, a subaltern folklore.

However, in Feinberg's call to "repoliticize" folklore, do we not begin to perceive the contours of a new inauthenticity? It is, after all, one thing to recognize that folklore is a historical product, consciously refashioned by its enthusiasts according to new social configurations. It is quite another to suggest that, given this social reality, authentic folklore can be made to serve projects of political transformation. The tension here lies in whether the enjoyment of folklore is considered a means to a political end, or an end in itself.

This tension can be illustrated through Feinberg's reconstruction of an Easter Monday celebration in Slovakia. Traditionally, on this day, the boys of a village visit the houses of girls, coax them outside, douse them in water and whip them with willow branches. The ritual is popularly understood to increase fertility. Feinberg offers a rich account of participating in this event as part of his ensemble, highlighting the sense of community and celebration that the ritual dousing, whipping, dancing, eating and drinking promotes. By the end of the celebrations, he recalls: "I knew without a doubt [...] that folklore was the most beautiful thing in the world and, yes, all of us, whoever we were, were one big collective." (113)

While this account beautifully captures the real sense of collective effervescence he and others experienced as part of the ensemble, we might well ask whether this ritual would survive in the repertoire of a folklore oriented towards progressive political transformation. What happens when we center on the relegation of women to the role of passive participants in the dance? Should a more politically conscious folklore subvert these traditional gender divisions? Or should the entire event be cast aside as promoting oppressive gender norms? It seems unlikely that such an intervention would produce a folklore whose authenticity was experienced as such by current enthusiasts.

Indeed, it is hard to see how such a conscious effort to turn folklore towards the project of political transformation would not reproduce the same inauthentic division between folklore and the public that Feinberg details elsewhere in the book. Not only would such an effort likely be quickly labeled “inauthentic” by detractors, for whom enjoyment has been replaced with political utility, but opposition to such progressive political interventions could garner wider support in society. One need only consider the contemporary culture wars over “political correctness,” and the cover they have provided for reactionary forces to masquerade as guardians of “apolitical” enjoyment, to see the fate of such efforts.

The critique here is of more than just the instrumentalization of folkloric enjoyment for political ends; rather, we might well go further and ask whether there is not something inauthentic about politics itself. Certainly, this was how it appeared to the young Marx, for whom political society was an estranged expression of civil society, over and above which it stood in antagonism. Henri Lefebvre noted precisely this point when he highlighted the parallel structures of the state and religion as both being reifications of the social. In Marx’s work, Lefebvre went on to note, modern political society is premised on both an antagonistic division between the state and civil society and, therefore, a fissure within the human subject, between man and citizen.<sup>1</sup> Understood in this way, politics, far from the realm of authentic emancipation, should be considered as part of the complex of contradictions of modern society that gives rise to the problem of inauthenticity itself.

Understanding the inauthenticity that underpins politics is especially salient today in an era of growing anti-political sentiment. As membership in political parties crashes, voter participation declines, and opinion polling notes growing disillusionment and distrust in the political class, the seeming inauthenticity of political society becomes all the more stark. “Put another way,” the Gramscian scholar Elizabeth Humphrys has noted, “the separation and antagonism between social and political interests that Marx theorized [...] is in the process of becoming the dominant form of state-civil society relations again.”<sup>2</sup> Should it be surprising that authentic folklore, a movement established

<sup>1</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *State, Space, World: Selected Essays* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. 75.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Humphrys, “Anti-politics, the Early Marx and Gramsci’s ‘Integral State,’” *Thesis Eleven*

in conscious opposition to the perceived intrusions of political society into folklore, should emerge in the current moment?

Perhaps authentic folklore's suspicion of the political should be understood less as an aesthetic expression of the technocratic liberalism of post-communist society and more as an articulation of this wider anti-political sentiment. In an era in which political systems have been hollowed out of their social content and European politicians struggle, in Peter Mair's words, over who will "rule the void," authentic folklore's understanding of politics as an inauthentic intrusion into the social has a particular resonance.<sup>3</sup> Set against this recent historical background, Feinberg's call for an authentic "repoliticization" of folklore seems out of sync with one of the dominant social trends of our era. Whether it is possible or, indeed, desirable to resist this anti-political tide is a question worth considering.

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing-out of Western Democracy* (London: Verso, 2013).